The Loss of Female Personality andSelf-identity in Community Development Activity: A Theory-Practice Gap in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Drawing upon research undertaken with community development practitioners in the North Central of Nigeria, this article argues that feminist community development processes have been undermined by the application of policy initiatives which were designed to achieve equality and fairness. The application of targeted and technically neutral systems has resulted in a managerialist approach to community development which has privileged masculinist practices and marginalized the intersubjective, consciousness-raising practices which are central to feminism. The consequence is that the broader emancipatory principles of community development practice have been distorted within a policy discourse of equality

I.   Introduction

It is well established that community development is a contested activity, with processes and methods that can be used for conflicting political purposes (Mayo, 1994; Miller and Ahmed, 1997; Shaw 2004). Feminism is also a contested concept with varying political possibilities for the achievement of gender equality (Hobson and Lister, 2002). However, any community development practice that calls itself 'feminist' has emancipatory intentions towards women which relate to underlying community development principles of equality, justice and fairness. Feminist interventions aim to counter unequal gender relationships, and feminist practitioners argue that collective community action with women makes a significant contributionto the achievement of a more equal and just society (Dominelli, 2006; Ledwith and Springett, 2010).

Government policy between 1999 and 2010 was deduced to be informed bycommunitarian discourses and community development processes in the developed world particularly Britain in the Tory years which wereharnessed as a means of addressing social inequalities (Lister, 1997).Policy was premised on measuring deprivation/participation of women in the North Central of Nigeria, this process is guided by an earlier work on geographical neighborhoods' which was implemented through a common framework of 199 National Indicators(NIs) of exclusion that were used to target and measure communitydevelopment interventions towards specific priority areas in the United Kingdom (UK) (CLG,2006; Sender et al., 2010). This instrumental framework for managing practiceundermined the developmental, inter-subjective practices associatedwith feminist and other anti-oppressive approaches and created tensionsbetween policy and practice despite the apparent congruence of objectives.

Drawing upon feminist practice and research with communitydevelopment practitioners in the Northeast of England, this article arguesthat despite the apparent compatibility between feminism and governmentpolicy aims regarding equality, policy has problematized the central feministprinciple that addressing gender inequality requires specific attention tofemale experience and that the very aims of equality, justice and fairnesshave been undermined with reference to women. This is important notonly to women, but also to the wider constituency affected by communitydevelopment practice.

The article argues that, for Women practitioners in community development promotes open and transformational change but that this change is undermined by prescribed policy agendas which reinforce masculinist structures of power. The research was undertaken during the period of a return to democratic government in Nigeria, but the questions raised remain pertinent, concerned with the relationship between policy and practice, and how and who defines the issues at stake.

Central to this for Women in community development is the recognition of the importance of self-definition for women and the opportunities available to intersubjectively identify the nature of oppression and the methods by which

this should be addressed in community settings. The new Democratic Government is addressing some problematic areas. For example, there is a pledge to include more women in all forms of officialdom particularly occasioned by the United Nations (UN) affirmative program which has grown around targeting and inclusion for different categories of women and referred to by critic as tokenism.

The intention is to give professionals more freedom, and to support a 'new culture' of social action (Cameron, 2010). However, current practices are deeply imbued with structures and principles pursued by the successive governments. Moreover, the notion of government asa Big Society is already attracting criticism that all over the world it'seffort is perceived as being weak on equality (Coote, 2010) and the models for implementation are derisory towards practitioner-led community development approaches. Whether Women community development efforts can survive or revive in the emergent political and economic climate may depend on a reassertion of some fundamental principles of feminist and other anti-oppressive practices.

II.   Background

The research emerged from practice experience, which suggested that there were problems in the field relating to accountability and the central dynamics which sustain community development work. Between 2012 and 2013, in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of twenty-four community development workers in Kogi State with the purpose of exploring these issues. Preliminary findings were shared with interviewees through focus group discussions enabling them to comment debate and develop the analysis. Although the research questions were not specifically designed to consider Women in community development approaches, the research itself was designed from a Women's perspective and the questions which were highlighted as being at stake emerged from a Women's analysis of contemporary practice.

This approach center's the experiences of women as workers, community activists and community members, recognizing that continuing gender inequality has implications for the general priorities, methods and objectives of professional community development approaches. The findings suggest that feminist concerns reflect wider difficulties within the field and that a feminist analysishas much to offer in terms of understanding contemporary community development practice dilemmas with regard to the contested territory of community development interventions.

III.   Feminist community development practice

During the 1970s, the activism of working class women at a local level, particularly through the Community Development Projects (CDPs) began to combine with the emergent feminism of female practitioners (Dominelli, 2006). Women workers in the CDPs often shared a Marxist analysis with their male peers, but found themselves marginalized as women, leading to debates about gender and power in the community work field (Hanmer and Rose, 1980).Whilst the subsequent dynamic of female activism was creative and productive, it also contained its own tensions related to differences and inequalities, particularly of class, race and sexuality between women (Carby, 1982; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1992). In particular, there was a disparity of experience between local female activists and middle class professional workers, and different priorities between Black and white women and lesbian and heterosexual women.

A body of criticism emerged, claiming that the UK Women's Movement, in attempting to unify women's experience of oppression, was failing to address power relations and difference between them (for example, seeCarby, 1982; Amos and Parmer, 1984). Black feminists, perceiving the Women's Movement to be irrelevant to their experiences of racism, developed their own separate movements, for example the Organization ofWomen of Asian and African Descent, and spin off groups such asBrixton Black Women's Group (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1992).

Despite the tensions which characterized the women's liberation movement,the importance of consciousness-raising to the personal-politicaldynamic remained central to all feminist community development processes.The common discourse of oppression encouraged a continuingexamination of the meaning of different experiences, particularly withregard to racism and heterosexism, which in turn was influenced by thecommunity politics associated with Civil Rights and Black liberation inthe United States and had implications for groups other than women(Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1992; Mirza, 1997).

An early statement of community activism by the Combahee River Collective(1977) drew upon the insight of Angela Davis that Black womenin the United States had always been central to anti-oppressive strugglesbecause of the particularity of their personal, social and economic circumstances(Davis, 1981). Analyses by Black women became highly influentialin community development approaches which adopted a feminist stanceand marked a moment in which questions of identity and the reality ofdifferences and inequalities between women began to impact upon the collectivepractices of feminism. Community engagement was integral to theunderstanding of Black feminist activists and academics such as bellhooks (e.g. 2003) and this in turn informed the understanding of communitydevelopment practitioners and theorists in the United Kingdom(Dominelli, 2006; Ledwith and Springett, 2010).

Consciousness-raising within feminist community development practice is collective, educational and critical. It involves breaking silences about everyday experiences of oppression, encourages historical and social analysisof the sources of oppression and is linked to political struggles for equality. The process challenges 'naïve consciousness associated with self-blame and political passivity (Freire, 1973:3). 'Critical consciousnesses withinfeminist community development practice is associated with feminist awareness, and develops as women begin to explain their everyday experiences with reference to external systems and structures of inequality and oppression.

Informal educational methods involving exploratory conversation and small group work which heighten subjective awareness are important components of consciousness-raising in all community development processes (Smith, 1993). For women, female-only space is important to this process, enabling them to transcend the unequal gender dynamic in which they are defined as 'other' (Hooks, 2003). Gender-based identification and shared gender experiences provide the basis for 'breaking silences', naming features of oppression, and organizing collectively to build personal skills, knowledge and confidence. This is the foundation for challenging oppressive systems and behavior's. Thus, one research participant uses the internalization of empowerment and gender oppression as a starting pointfor her practice with women:

> What we do with women here . . . is help them to have a better understanding of the different ways in which they internalize what hashappened to them over the years and how they accept it and very often they challenge anything that is set against it and so we think . . . let's start from where you are and work through.
> Interview 23, 8.06.12

Consciousness-raising increases critical understanding of the subjectiveimpact of social constructs such as gender, race (tribe), religion and class. Locatingcommon experiences of oppression builds relationships and trustbetween those who share identities in these terms, leading to increased confidence,strength and solidarity:

> There were some men who would meet as a Black workers group as well and that was to look at wider issues but I think the most useful and the most productive times were when we met as women because the other thing we recognized was that as uneducated women there were certain types of oppression that we faced that the men never faced.

Collective understanding emerging from self-as-subject includes using the female 'self' of the community development practitioner:

> I tell them honestly about my life and that makes a big difference to the person when you say 'I know what you're talking about' and you can see the difference in their response to me because I'm not going in telling them what I think they should do. I have had experience of that and they value that honesty.
> Interview 17, 17.4.12

'Collective consciousness' involves women identifying and organizing around their shared political priorities for change, particularly regarding the impact of gendered power relationships. This then links with other issues raised in community development educational practices which start with people's everyday lives, uses practitioner subjectivity and situates insights within a wider political picture. Such practice requires an analysis of power in the structures of inequality that reach into local communities and impact on personal lives (Ledwith, 2007).

In recent years, the coherence of this approach to practice has been undermined as government priorities have emphasized the development of technically well-functioning and locally cohesive geographical communities ofparticipating citizens. Through the use of NIs, 'community' became equated in policy and practice with 'social exclusion'. As such, community became both the problem and the solution in a process which elided internal and external questions of power and difference (Fremeaux, 2005).

The terms of reference of community activism and development have been pre-determined and reframed according to the policy priorities of organizational access, participation in decision-making and governance. In this shift, the rationale for separate space for self-identified groups, such as women, has disappeared and it has become less easy to share and name the experience of oppression:

> There is just nothing there like there used to be for women as a group andthat is just becoming harder and harder, so I think women now are notseen as a group in their own right.
> Interview 5: 15.5.12

Although there are accounts in the research about the struggles of feministpractitioners exercising individual agency against the tensions of currentpolicy context, contemporary narratives about moving from self-empowermentto exercising collective agency within wider politicalarenas are noticeably absent.

IV.   Contemporary community development and government policy

It has been argued that the strongest position for community developmentis in spaces and boundaries between local people and policy makers (Miller and Ahmed, 1997). Exercising personal and collective agency in thesespaces is central to the dynamic of critical community developmentparticipation (Martin, 1999; Shaw, 2004). Recent research found thatfemale-only spaces for mutual reflection and learning were crucial to influencingthe changes that needed to happen to further gender equality locally(Corry and Robson, 2010). Moreover, evidence suggests that as womencross the boundary from informal community action to formal politics,such space remains critical because their politics are rooted in 'trust, mutualityand [build] upon informal community connections' (Lowndes, 2004; Spence and Stephenson, 2007; Bedford, Gorbing and Robson, 2008).

However,policy-directed community development has increasingly formalized networksand relationships in the name of transparency and accountability.Although active citizenship and public engagement in local governancewere hailed as integral to government's project for greatersocial inclusion and equality, evidence suggests that the space for politicallyengaged female activism has narrowed (Berry and de Oteyza, 2007; SERRIC, 2008; Corry and Robson, 2010).

`   The main tool of policy implementation has been Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which were introduced in 2000 to bring together local people and the public, private and voluntary sectors to improve the design and delivery of local services. LSPs were cited as central to implementing the White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' (CLG, 2008a), intended to devolve power to a local level. LSPs are indicative of a government's policy lead concerned with questions of access to pre-given structures of power and decision-making in the society

. Externally determined indicators applied to particular neighborhoods' set the terms for the local devolution of power and for improvement targets (CLG, 2008b). The evaluation and funding of community development became implicitly linked with local government performance management instruments such as local area agreements (CLG, 2006). Such a framework demands a model of professional practice which is technically neutral and serves policy expectations:

> Support and supervision is more about management issues, it's notabout me as an individual and my professional and personaldevelopment. . .It's more about are you doing what you are supposed todo, how are you doing it and what are your targets ... A lot of the trainingnow seems to be what they call quality assurance which really is aboutcovering your back you know when they talk about making sure you areproviding a quality of work, when really it's about monitoring; not aboutfuture development.
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> Interview 17, 17.4.12

Self-defined and transformative processes, key tenets of feminist communitydevelopment approaches, are irrelevant to such a framework and assuch have no legitimacy in the management of community development.In this context, women and their organizations have become severelymarginalized from local partnership structures. It was reported in 2007that 72 percent of Community Development Associations (CDAs) did not provide specific support to promotewomen's engagement. Only 19 percent of CDA groups had female chairs,and these were more likely to be community representatives at a deliverylevel rather than on strategic CDA boards.

Whereas women's organizationsrepresent around 7 percent of the total voluntary and community sector(VCS), on CDA, they represented less than 2 percent of VCS representation(Gudnadottir et al., 2007). The voices of women who do reach the partnershiptable are marginalized by 'discriminatory attitudes and practices,stereotyping and a male dominated style of politics' (Berry and de Oteyza, 2007) and women's organizations are found to be 'hitting a brickwall' in getting/having their voices heard within public bodies and localpartnerships (Corry and Robson, 2010).

Likewise, when powerful 'partners' have already determined the meaningsof terms like 'empowerment' and 'partnership' before communityrepresentatives enter the arena, this frames how people learn to think andbehave in these shared spaces (Atkinson, 2003; Ledwith, 2005; Taylor, 2007). The dominant discourse silences alternative meanings and marginalizesissues which are not within its field (Atkinson, 1999). For communitydevelopment practitioners with feminist and other emancipatory perspectives,the space for maneuvers is thus diminished:

> So you're trying to empower and enable local people to take part, butyou're working in a backdrop where local people aren't stupid, and theyknow decision makers are making decisions . . . .'This is thedecisions we are making'. And they do it claiming they have consulted thelocal people about it. They're not paying any regard to what local peopleare saying 'cos they've got their own agenda.

> Interview 12, 12.6.12

Far from being empowering, local governance structures have invaded localspace and community development workers have been co-opted to managelocal people (Shaw, 2004). 'Participation' in this context trains people for aparticular mode of rationality and technicality and serves to obscure criticalthought, thereby protecting a policy agenda which has closed debate anddialogue in favour of financial and social management (Atkinson, 1999; Atkinson, 2003; Ledwith, 2005).

Different identities and possibilities forlegitimate dissent have been excluded and silenced, further marginalizingthose who might gain greater power from critical engagement. As Shawsuggests, 'If empowerment means reconciling people to powerlessnessthen this is an ultimate irony for community development' (2004, p. 24).Government's notion of The Big Society is extendingthe trend of devolving power to localities, allocating responsibility toneighborhoods', but moving away from policy dependence onLocal Authority-led citizen involvement (McMullin, 2010).

A 'communityorganizing' model, originating in the United States, is informing contemporarypolitical language to describe the implementation of the BigSociety. This model, derived from Alinsky is based upon a 'zero sumgame' of power and relies upon an individual to act as an outside representativeon behalf of local groups (McGaffey and Khalil, undated; Alinsky, 1971). 'Community organizing' has long been criticized by feministsbecause of its failure to incorporate the personal in its analysis of the politicalor to analysis how power works at the micro-level to maintain the statusquo (McGaffey and Khalil, undated).

As such it bypasses the possibilitiesfor subjective identifications of the impact of power and intersubjective processesof development and thus marginalizes women along with theirorganizations and concerns. Although, Government has complained of the problems associated with bureaucracy and is pledging to 'getrid of centralized bureaucracy' and to 'give professionals much morefreedom' to open the way for 'innovation, diversity and responsiveness'(Cameron, 2010), this is being pursued without an analysis of power, andas an alternative to public services, a means of cutting the public deficit(Coote, 2010).

There is an underlying continuity with the conservative self-helpmodel popular during the 1980s in which community developmentinterventions were utilized to manage and contain the impact of poverty(Miller and Ahmed, 1997). Like the 1980s, the evidence suggests thatpolicy imposed under the rubric of The Big Society will result in an increasedburden of care upon women in poorer communities (Green, 1992; Dominelli, 1995).

The Coalition Government in the UK was sued by the Fawcett Society, a leading women's rights group, for breachingthe gender equality duty (EOC, 2006) by failing to assess the disproportionateimpact of its economic policies upon women (Asthana, 2010). The possibility of Women groups in Nigeria and other developing countries doing same in near a zero level owing to lack of the ability to act as agents.

The dominant approach of recent policy and law has been to assume aneutral starting point with regard to equality. The consequence is tosuggest that differential or specialist services would therefore create inequality.This ignores not only questions about the relationship between self,power and inequality which is inherent within feminist analysis, but alsothe empirical evidence of continuing structural disadvantage for women.Thus, women's voices remain muted in policy-making arenas and theyremain disadvantaged in domestic, social, economic and political spheresin Nigeria.

V. Conclusions

Using informal education methods of conversation, small group work andmobilizing the potential of women-only organizations, feminist communitydevelopment practice has demonstrable success in building skills,knowledge and confidence and enabling a collective voice to challengeoppressive systems and behaviors at local community levels.

The principles of feminist communitydevelopment are relevant to wider issues of organization and developmentrelating to empowerment and feminist community development practiceshould identify with injustices beyond gender whilst insisting upon the centralityof female experience to understand oppression across difference.

Although the aims of equality, justice and fairness pursued through democratic governance promise to provide guarantee for feministcommunity development interventions in Nigeria and these ideals resonate well with the

communitarianideals and discourses promoted by the governments in the developed society, enormoustensions and conflicts will transpire due to the expected reliance on technical discourse by professionals whosecountermanded reflective, critical interventions mobilize the selfand identity of the practitioner.

These tensions and conflicts have been deleteriousto feminist community development practice. Government's quest tocontrol change towards its own predetermined vision of social order andorganization effectively closed the informal spaces necessary for the applicationof open, democratic and emancipator community development principleswhich are central to feminist interventions and in which feministpractice is integral.

The Labour Government did not appear to be preparedto risk a critique of its own vision of a cohesive society and thereforewomen's organizations and the potential of feminist community developmentwere denied opportunities to contribute fully to the equality agenda as processes intended to devolve power to localities, but with centralizedaccountability militated against the self-empowerment and transformingpotential of community development.

The common framework of neighborhoods 'resulted in an instrumental approach to the management of communitydevelopment which, in the absence of a gender analysis of inequality andpower, obscured the issues affecting women's everyday lives. The technicallanguage of local partnerships has inhibited critical thought and silencedsubjective experience. Within this, the meaning of gender inequality hasbeen neutralized and objectified without regard to the experience ofwomen or the structural realities of inequality.

Equating community andidentity only with geographical neighborhoods' ignored differenceswithin localities and marginalized women's organizations, whilst equalitypolicies have sometimes threatened the very spaces where women canbegin to address the consequences of their inequality.It is seductive to think that government might address someof these concerns. It claims to be devolving power, cutting bureaucracy andoffering professionals more freedom within a culture of social action.

However, the rubric of the Big Society, and the 'community organizing' model that is being talked up as central to its implementation involves an action framework which is devoid of references to structures of power. Similarly, the old conservative model of self-help which embraces community development as a means of managing poverty avoids all analyses of structural inequality. As such, the idea of the Big Society is incompatible with key tenets of feminist approaches to self-empowerment and emancipation.

If community development is to survive as a practice relevant to peopleencountering structural injustice and oppression, it is important that the central tenets of emancipatory approaches, as exemplified by feminist practice, are revisited and reaffirmed. At its best, community development protectsand develops spaces within which marginality can be mobilized as a source of strength and creativity.

At this moment of political transition, it is important that theorists and practitioners recognize how much independentspace has been lost under democratic government. The new struggle will be to identify and inhabit emergent spaces before they are re-colonized by a raft of new prescriptive policy designed to serve the vision of the BigSociety. Understanding the importance and the continuing dynamic of feminist community development practice offers a starting place.

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Authors Contribution

Authors Contribution: this work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Hussayn Idris designed the study, wrote the protocol and interpreted the data. Jude Inegbeboh and Christiana Giwaanchored the field study, gathered the initial data and performed preliminary data analysis. Hussayn Idris and Christiana Giwa managed the literature searches and produced the initial draft. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.