

# "Globalization, Engendered Knowledge systems and Strategies for Women's Empowerment"

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## **Ineke Buskens**

Project Leader, Gender Research in Africa and Arab Countries into ICTs for Empowerment; Director and founder of Research For the Future

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen, your Excellencies, friends and colleagues, I am honoured to be given the opportunity to speak at this important conference, about Globalization, Engendered Knowledge Systems and Strategies for Women Empowerment.

Conferences could be organised around any of these concepts: they are vast and complex. What has given me the audacity to weave for you a tapestry of thought that will include strands of these three concepts and speak to some of their dimensions, is the fact that my work as GRACE Project Leader has taken me to the nexus of globalization, engendered knowledge systems (the lack of and need for them) and strategies for women empowerment.

GRACE stands for Gender Research into ICTs for Empowerment in Africa and Arab countries. At the moment GRACE involves 25 research teams in 17 countries. GRACE was envisioned by The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada and the Association for Progressive Communication. It was given birth to in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2004, and I was the midwife. GRACE is funded by IDRC and operated by the GRACE Project Voluntary Association, of which I am the Director, so I indeed adopted the baby. I am exceedingly glad I did. I am very happy to see in the audience four of my colleagues, three team leaders from Yemen: Rokshana, Ahlam and Zahra, and Saneya from Egypt.

**Globalization, knowledge systems, gender and women empowerment.** These are loaded concepts with a plurality of meanings, even in English. I dare not even think about the language discussions Arabic language speakers could have around these concepts!

So I will try to speak as much as possible in images and stories, and in doing this I hope that I can bring across to you where I stand; what my theoretical, methodological and normative positions are, and how I understand these concepts in relation to each other.

The first point I want to make is that **we are all knowledge constructors**, whether we have embraced knowledge construction as our profession, as most academic researchers have, or not. Human beings cannot help but be knowledge constructors; we are designed/created that way. We not only construct knowledge all the time, we are permeated by it; it is the air we breathe. I sometimes think of us as "thought in a thought-based universe operating our bodies as vehicles for our expressions and experiences". Of course, **when we have incorrect information or are in an emotionally unstable state, we will construct invalid, erroneous and dysfunctional knowledge.** I have witnessed this a lot since the type of research I do enables me to

come close to people: as a cultural anthropologist I have specialised in qualitative and participatory research approaches.

Furthermore, as Einstein once said: **“very few people think with their own minds and feel with their own hearts”**. Yet we do keep on thinking and feeling, even while very little of this seems to be of our own conscious choosing and our own creation. But because we have the capacity to think with our own mind and feel with our own heart, we, as human beings, cannot shed the responsibility for the world which we helped co-create with our thoughts and our feelings, even when these were not of our own mind or of our own heart.

That is not only my normative position, but also has become my understanding of how things operate in this world. To use a dramatic example (I love dramatic examples): Although Marie Antoinette actually never said: “let them eat cake” when she was told about the plight of the poor in her country which could not even afford to buy bread, I still hold her responsible for her death by execution at the beginning of the French Revolution. She did not heed the signs of the distress of the lower classes around her, bred as she was to be blind to their misery. We cannot escape the consequences of our thoughts, emotions and actions. As I was taught in Africa: “We always act in the presence of the other”. It is up to us to become aware of what that means at every moment, in every context. It is part and parcel of our human journey on this planet; it is the task of our existence on earth.

The subtitle of this conference speaks of **“engendered knowledge systems”**.

Our lives on this planet are gendered. We walk this planet as women and men, and this biological difference has been loaded by us with meanings, which have repercussions for our family lives, our social, economic lives and even our religious lives.

Our knowledge systems are gendered and gender power imbalanced as all our human artefacts are. The way we dress communicates how we see ourselves, from a gender, class, religious and ethnic understanding. We communicate who we think we are with the way we present ourselves, the way we talk, dress and behave (do we shake hands with strangers or not?), and in doing so we influence others to construct particular knowledge about us.

Nothing in our lives seems to be gender neutral. Nothing is safe from this “gendering divide”, and this “gender and gendering divide” runs deep in us and keeps affecting us deeply.

To illustrate this point, I want to read you this quote:

“Whoever amongst you sees an evil act let her change it with her hand, and if she cannot then with her tongue and if she cannot then with her heart, and this is the least requirement of faith”.

Maybe you recognise these words? These words were spoken by the Prophet Mohammed according to the Koran, as quoted by Dr Abdul Kareem Qasim Saeed in his book *Citizenship and the issue of the State in Islamic Thought*, page 51.

I love these words; I love the loving thought behind them, the care for the world, the care for humanity, the concept of community that is behind it, the idea that we, as

human race are all connected. I resonate with these words, with these thoughts, with this state of mind. These words could describe what I do, who I am, what I stand for and who I want to see reflected in my eyes when I brush my teeth before going to bed.

Yet, these words as I found them, translated into English, excluded me. So I changed the original “he” to “she”.

This text and others like it exclude me and they exclude other women. And I want to be included. I am not a man, not a “he”, but I am a human being. I am a sovereign entity. My existence is my purpose. My birth right, my divine right.

**As scientists, we have to ask the question: “Why is the male gender consistently used in our texts to the exclusion of the female gender, even in our religious texts?”**

I have come to understand that we cannot construct our knowledge in a way that is free of gender, when we have not transcended our understanding of ourselves as gendered human beings. People may raise the point that the actual use of this gendered language is not important; the “he” actually does include the “she”. Well, if that is so, then why is the female gender not used instead of the male, at least half of the time? Furthermore, we know that this argument is not valid anymore. We know enough about perception, about how our brain works to know that it is important for women to hear language that includes them. We know that words do make an impact on human consciousness, just as we know that watching violence incites violence.

I do hope that I have made my point: our knowledge construction processes are gendered, with the female gender systematically excluded, and this exclusion cuts to the deepest level of knowledge we as human beings want to experience - our need to know God.

Engendering our knowledge systems needs our conscious and consistent efforts: we need to become gender aware, and we need to become aware of the gender impact that our thoughts, our feelings and our actions have on ourselves, on each other and our environments.

Knowledge systems centre around us, the knowledge constructors, but they also include all the artefacts, the technologies we have created to assist us, and the epistemologies, the research concepts, be they of theoretical, methodological or normative nature. Our instruments of knowledge construction are gendered also and have to become engendered when we want to include women to the same degree as we include men. Much can be said here, but space permits me to lift out only one example:

Not even the information and communication technology we use increasingly in our knowledge construction processes, the new ICTs as they are called, are gender neutral.

Access to ICTs, the use of ICTs and control of ICTs are taking place in gendered environments, mediated by people with gendered mindsets. We have found in our research that gender-blind ICT policy invariably favours the male gender. The GRACE study in Zimbabwe found that the students using the free computer labs at the University of Harare were predominantly male. The researchers learnt from the female students that the opening times of the computer labs were not favourable to them as they had responsibilities as wives, mothers and daughters at home during those times.

Furthermore, when they would line up for the computers under the ‘first come, first served’ rule, they would run the risk of being pushed out of line by the male students. One of the recommendations of the Zimbabwean research team to the Harare University management will be to create free computer labs for “women only” at the university campus. Otherwise the so-called free computer labs at the university campus will remain another example of unintentional - yet very effective - gender discrimination.

I am glad to know that there are Internet cafés and Internet café spaces for girls and women only, in Aden. Yet, if the University of Aden wants to see female students use the university computer labs outside of classes, it could be worthwhile to conduct gender research into the actual use of these computer labs.

While our knowledge systems are thus gendered, we can engender them. If we commit to this, we commit to becoming gender aware enough to understand in which ways our knowledge systems are gendered and how the gender imbalances and gender power imbalances play out. We also need to become courageous and compassionate enough to make explicit space for the female gender that has been systematically and effectively excluded.

This is where I want to speak about the concept of **women empowerment and strategies for women empowerment.**

Engendering knowledge systems is in itself a most powerful strategy for women empowerment. Focusing on the kingpin in this system, the human being as knowledge constructor, the essence of this strategy will thus be located in us as persons, as beings, even more so than in our libraries, computer centres and theoretical, methodological and normative concepts. We as women and men dreaming of gender change have to understand how we contribute to the gendered status quo through our own thinking, feelings and actions.

Before I go deeper into these particular concepts, I want to **weave the thread of globalization into this tapestry.** What does globalization mean in this region when we think about gendered knowledge systems, about the need to engender these knowledge systems and strategies for women empowerment?

From my perspective, there are two ways to look at **globalization:**

- a) Globalization means more economic freedom and more opportunities for everybody, especially the developing world;
- or
- b) Globalization means more effective exploitation where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (within countries and between countries) and where women and children bear the brunt of this growing globalization of poverty and exploitation.

Regarding this region (the Middle East and Africa), and from the perspective of gendered knowledge systems and women empowerment, I have done some research – I am a student of your region still - and I found some insightful remarks by Dr Zaki Badawi made in 1994. Dr Badawi was, at that time (he was quoted in the book *The Prize of Honour - Muslim women lifting the veil of silence on the Islamic world* by Ian Goodwin (first printed 1994, reprinted 2007)) head of the Muslim College in London, and he also served at the High Council of Islamic Affairs, which seems to be the highest authority deciding on issues of

Islam. He may still be doing just that at this current time, but I did not verify this. He was formerly on the faculty of Al Azhar University in Cairo.

From him come the words: “Very few Muslim countries have given women their full rights and both Islamic law and the message of Islam have been violated. But today, Petro-Islam with its vast amounts of money is letting loose on the Islamic world a wave of fundamentalism. The movement largely funded by the Saudis and Kuwait is pushing a doctrine that is anti-woman, anti-intellectual, anti-progress and anti-science. I am extremely concerned with what is happening to women, and such doctrine is also very destructive for Islam” (p. 27).

“There has never been an Islamic obligation for women to cover at any time. In fact, veiling the face is an innovation that has no foundation whatsoever in Islam. The hijab veil (which covers all of a Muslim woman’s hair) is also not obligatory. The veil originated as a Persian elitist fashion to distinguish aristocracy from the common masses, and has moved in and out of fashion ever since” (p. 30).

“Even in Saudi Arabia the covering of women from head to toe is recent; it was not required before the discovery of oil” (p. 30).

In Dr Badawi’s perspective, the most important indicator of change in the Islamic world is the treatment of its women. “The manner in which Islamic culture relates to women reveals much about how that society is structured and how it relates to a host of other issues – sociological, political and issues of basic human rights. Muslim countries currently face conflicting trends: on the one hand, growing religious extremism, and on the other hand, the vital need to communicate and compete in a modern technological world. How they balance the two in respect to the position and treatment of women will indicate how they are likely to succeed in integrating these two polarized facets of their society” (p. 28).

I also learnt that in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, fundamentalist organizations have obliged women to completely veil by paying men monthly supplements for every female in their family who is covered (Goodwin, p. 17). In Kuwait and The Emirates, fundamentalist charities offer men substantial cash bonuses for taking wives polygamously (Goodwin, p. 17).

My sources and research into the relationship between globalization, engendering knowledge systems and strategies for women empowerment are limited, I admit - but I intend to continue the investigation.

Now globalization means to me that no country is an island anymore, and that knowledge construction processes at power nexuses have influence everywhere. It is also clear that the knowledge constructed by power may be forced upon or sold to the people targeted for influence as truth.

**Power may come to us disguised as truth.**

**This is, of course, not a new understanding for gender researchers and researchers who study the position of minorities in society.**

The type of data outlined above raise many questions:

Why would the royal families of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait pay billions and billions of dollars to the Islamist fundamentalist organizations? Is it to pay ransom money so as not to be harassed and killed by the fundamentalists, as some sources claim? Is it to maintain a kind of power balance between the West and traditional Muslim culture? Is it to divert attention away from the growing influence of American military might in the Middle East, as a Saudi government official seems to claim?

These are interesting questions, and they would warrant further investigation. However, for our focus at this conference, other **questions** are more pertinent:

- a) Why is it so important for the fundamentalist organizations to see women covered up as much as possible?
- b) Why are men paid cash bonuses to marry women polygamously?
- c) What is it in women that has to be hidden, repressed, oppressed?
- d) What is it in women, what is it of women, that may not be seen?
- e) Is this “game of gendering rule and divide” not keeping people like us engrossed in what is actually a very immature gender drama, while our world is burning? We may not have a planet left for future generations to play on and grow and discover if we do not heed the signs with which our planet tells us that the way that we live, the stubborn mindset of exploiting nature instead of respecting it, is not sustainable.

I hope that some of you take up these questions. I hope that when you have the answers, “that you change these evil acts with your hands, and if you cannot then with your tongue and if you cannot then with your heart, and this is the least requirement of faith”.

During your journey of investigating your thinking, your feelings and your actions, **it would be good to question in what way your thoughts, feelings and actions are sexist towards women and contribute to the gendered status quo that seems to become more oppressing for women by the day.**

The truth is personal and personal is politics. Women can be just as and even more sexist than men, as Phyllis Chesler has so clearly outlined in *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2003). The degree to which women are hostile and even inhumane to other women depends, of course, on the degree to which the context in which they live is patriarchal. But the female form of sexism can cut women even deeper than the male form: expressed as shunning, shaming and judging, so called benevolent female sexism favours the traditional status quo and punishes the women who want to carve new pathways for themselves and other women that break with the traditions, whatever these traditions have been constructed to be.

From the fact that the covering up of women only happened in Saudi Arabia after the discovery of the oil, we see that it does not take much time and effort to construct a tradition. Understanding how the knowledge that oppresses women is constructed gives us the tools to neutralise it, and this frees precious energy - of women and of men alike - to work together towards the development and betterment of our world.

While you scrutinize yourself honestly regarding your thoughts, feelings and actions, I advise you **to love yourself deeply and truly**. With every sexist trait you find, congratulate yourself on your honesty and courage and love yourself right through it. Do not fall into the trap of judging yourself and others. Then the nightmare never ends.

Keep dreaming, keep going, start thinking with your own mind and start feeling with your own heart again, and forgive yourself and forgive others.

Loving yourself is a most effective strategy when women empowerment and engendering knowledge systems is your passion, especially in your region, especially at this moment in time.

Thank you for your attention.

Ineke Buskens

Aden

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