

Introduction

Gender, ageing and empowerment: issues in contemporary African gerontology

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"Empowerment" is a key concept in many contemporary endeavours, including social research and social action. Its meaning may vary according to disciplinary perspectives, political objectives and other factors. But surely it includes elements of having choices and making decisions, being to some extent in control of one's life and the social and economic environment in which one lives that life.

Gerontologists have tended to focus their research on the problems of the elderly or even on the elderly as problems. Too often they lump older people into a faceless category of "the elderly" who are then viewed as frail, dependent and in need of help – attitudes often reflected in popular opinion. Certainly some older persons are like this. But others are competent and contributing members of their families and societies – or could become so, if ways are found to overcome cultural beliefs and practices which relegate elders to dependency, structural conditions related to the political economy, and gender differences in old-age experiences stemming from lifelong gender discriminations (Hampson, 1990; Udvardy & Cattell, 1992).

These problems exist everywhere, in wealthy nations such as the United States as well as in less developed areas, but in Africa the widespread and deep poverty of the continent makes them especially intense. Poverty empowers no one (*Ageing International*, 1995). Obviously some problems of elder empowerment will only be resolved if large issues such as poverty, unemployment, economic stagnation or decline, war and political instability are resolved. However, people have to live their daily lives in the face of problems which they cannot individually resolve. They – and we, the research community – have to begin where we are and to do what we can.

Research for empowerment

One way to go about this is by research which empowers the target group through its active participation in the research. The corollary to participatory action research is research-informed programmes and policy designed to go beyond simply alleviating problems to empowering individuals so they can have more control of their own lives (Møller, 1992; Thursz, Nusberg & Prather 1995).

All five articles in this special issue view older Africans as varied in their characteristics and capable of useful roles in their families and communities. One characteristic examined closely is that of gender differences and how they are related to issues of personal autonomy and economic self-sufficiency.

Donald Adamchak sets the stage in his article on demographic challenges to African elders' security in settings of economic and social change, widespread poverty and high unemployment, and the near total absence of comprehensive pension systems. He pays particular attention to population ageing and the impact of HIV/AIDS, the "grandmother's disease," on older Africans. He delineates significant lifelong gender differences in education, literacy and labour-force participation which produce wide disparities in the economic standing of older women and men and illustrates them by a case study from his research in Zimbabwe.

The next three articles look more closely at the experiences of older women: Zulu grandmothers in South Africa, Abaluyia widows in Kenya, and older Tswana women in Botswana. The authors examine macro- and micro-level interventions and the role of cultural, social and economic factors in inhibiting or enabling older women to be decision makers and to increase their personal autonomy and/or economic power.

Valerie Møller and **Ayanda Sotshongaye** report the effects of a state intervention, South Africa's non-contributory old-age pension, on the lives of Zulu grandmothers. Pensions are a main – and sometimes the only – source of income for poor households in South Africa. The Zulu grandmothers reported that they felt greater self-respect and a sense of accomplishment by feeding and providing in other ways for their families with their pension money. However limited the "purchasing power" of the pension or a grandmother's choices about how to spend the money (given that most of them live in multigenerational households), the women who share pensions with their families certainly have been empowered to develop their own economic independence in the modern economy and their more traditional roles as family providers and indulgent, supportive grandmothers to their grandchildren.

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In a different vein, **Maria Cattell** discusses ways that Abaluyia widows in Kenya manipulate cultural practices to their own advantage to control their household and its resources. While their first marriage gives them access to productive resources, many of these women see little advantage in remarriage after they are widowed. They prefer the widows' greater freedom of action and control of resources, however meagre, to the burden and demands of another husband. Even in terms of support and care in old age, a husband would be of little value, given that old-age support depends primarily on sons, daughters and grandchildren. Thus many Abaluyia women, empowered by widowhood, are refusing to accept the custom of widow remarriage.

Another approach is taken by **Sheila Tlou** in reporting her research which led to a carefully-designed and culturally-sensitive peer education and support programme in a Botswana village. This programme enhanced older Tswana women's roles as decision makers and educators in matters of family health. By giving the women special knowledge about HIV/AIDS and encouraging their application of the knowledge in family and community, the programme empowered older Tswana women to become more effective leaders in the prevention and treatment of a "modern" disease and also enabled them to empower others to deal with AIDS.

Finally, **Elizabeth Guillet** describes a different micro-level intervention in another Tswana village, where all elderly, men as well as women, are disempowered by poverty and family attitudes (influenced by modern retirement practices) which look down upon the old people as being "elderly

children," rather than the "respected elders" of Tswana tradition. Guillet's Wise Elders programme was developed during the course of her research with the participation of the target group of elders. The programme focussed on enabling elders to provide food to their families and to get better health care and small loans for themselves. It helped restore elders' cultural roles as family leaders and providers, and produced a shift in younger generations' perceptions of older persons as wise elders rather than elderly children.

Taken together, these articles point to some difficulties in empowering elders and also to ways in which elders have succeeded in achieving empowerment. They also indicate the importance of considering issues of gender and empowerment in future gerontological research in Africa.

References

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