



Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: 0966-369X (Print) 1360-0524 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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Mary Kinyanjui

To cite this article: Mary Kinyanjui (2019) A lone ranger: My journey towards becoming a feminist geographer in Nairobi, Kenya, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26:7-9, 1159-1169, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2018.1556616](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1556616)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1556616>



Published online: 15 May 2019.



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A lone ranger: My journey towards becoming a feminist geographer in Nairobi, Kenya

Mary Kinyanjui

Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Very few Kenyan universities offer modules on Gender or Feminism in their courses. Women are largely under-represented and very few hold senior positions. Due to the few numbers of female faculty, mentorship for young female scholars is lacking. Feminist writing by Female Kenyan geographers in professional geography journals is limited. Collective action among female geography faculty is also largely absent. This is largely due to the lack of feminist advocacy and policies in the universities. My journey to becoming a feminist geographer has received little or no support from the university. I have taken personal initiatives to link up with local and transnational gender associations in order to get insights on current feminist scholarship issues. My lived feminist experience and observations of the struggles of ordinary women in everyday livelihood negotiation have been my main motivation for continuing to do feminist work. Thus, my feminist work has concentrated on women in marginal economic informality. This paper presents my journey as a feminist geographer. It begins with a discussion on the state of feminist geography in three universities in Kenya namely, University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and Egerton University. This is followed by a presentation of my journey toward becoming a feminist geographer in the absence of a supportive infrastructure. My journey has been inspired by my lived experience. The paper concludes with a call for a concerted effort for feminist advocacy in Kenyan Geography departments.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 June 2018

Accepted 18 September 2018

KEYWORDS

Collective action; economic informality; feminist geography; Kenya; scholarship; university

The state of art of feminist geography in three Kenyan Universities

The observation by Kamau et al. (2011) that women are glaringly under-represented in higher education in Kenya perhaps explains why most of the Geography departments in Kenyan universities such as Kenyatta University and University of Nairobi lack courses or modules on Gender. The

CONTACT Mary Kinyanjui  marykinyanjui@yahoo.com  Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, PO Box 30197, Nairobi, 00100, Kenya.

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Department of Geography in Egerton University (<http://www.egerton.ac.ke/index.php/Geography/geography.html>; last accessed 10 October 2018) is the only one that offers a course on Gender and Development. The proportion of women faculty in geography departments compared to that of men in the three universities is very small. The department of Geography at the University of Nairobi has six female lecturers out of a faculty of 32 members. The department has never been headed by a female chair since its inception. Five of the six women lecturers have PhDs. There is no female Full or Associate Professor in the department. While two of the female lecturers have obtained the 'Senior Lecturer' rank, the others are appointed at the Lecturer grade.

The six female lecturers in Geography at the University of Nairobi have written a total of twelve papers according to the department website (<http://geography.uonbi.ac.ke>, last accessed on 10 October 2017). The oldest paper was written in 2005 while the latest was written in 2014. There is not much publishing on gender or feminist issues by the female lecturers. Apart from two published papers on women workers, the rest were on more general issues, such as environment. Some papers were jointly written with scholars from Europe. There is not much collective activity among the female lecturers. Only two female lecturers had co-authored papers jointly while one had co-authored a paper with a male staff member. None of the papers was published in professional geography journals.

One would expect that the Geography department in Kenyatta University would have more women because the university has had a female Vice Chancellor while the department has had two female heads. This is however not the case. The Department features a small number of female lecturers. It has four women faculty out of 25 lecturers according to the Geography department Website (<http://www.ku.ac.ke/schools/humanities/index.php/departments/geography>; last accessed on 10 October 2017). Three of them have PhDs while one does not. One female faculty is an Associate Professor while the rest are in the Lecturer grade. None of the female faculty in the Geography department has published an article on gender or feminism in a professional geography journal. Most of the publications have been co-authored with male scholars. There is little evidence of collective action among female faculty in research and writing.

The Geography Department at Egerton University, despite having had two female heads of department as well as a female Vice Chancellor, does not have any better representation of women in its ten member faculty. There is only one female faculty member of staff. She is in the Lecturer position grade. She has a PhD but none of her publications are on gender or feminism. Neither are the publications in professional geography journals.

Gender and feminism modules or courses are not offered unless the lecturer decides to introduce them in mainstream courses or modules on topics such as land tenure, demography, disaster, and risk. Kamau (2008) attributes the low score for female representation in education to the lack of incentives, of a feminist ideology and of a policy on gender in University hirings. Despite the fact that some Geography departments in Kenyatta and Egerton universities have had female heads, this has not improved the gender representation in the faculty. From my own experience, gender and feminist ideologies have been difficult to introduce because they are largely perceived as foreign. Gender and feminism have yet to be fully accepted as affecting the norm in Kenyan universities. In addition, gender and feminist concerns were actively articulated in the 1980s and 1990s with the support of international donor aid. When this donor funding was stopped, the support for gender research and activism in the university waned. Individual lecturers like myself, have struggled on their own in the pursuit of gender and feminism issues in the curriculum, research, and writing.

On becoming a feminist

In the Kenyan academia, female lecturers are struggling to gain ascendancy. Sometimes, it is upon an individual to struggle on their own to build a career. My gender, feminist research and my writing journey was shaped by my experience as a female in my family. At a young age, my grandmother told me that I would refuse to take care of babies while their mothers worked on the farm. Women would carry their babies to the farm and young girls would be tasked to take care of the babies. I would refuse to take up this task and argue, *niĩ ndirĩ na ng'ong'o wa gũkua mwana* (I have no back on which to carry a baby). I preferred to till the land rather than carry babies. When I had my baby, my grandmother teased me: "Who will carry the baby for you?" My grandmother constantly socialized me into the world of women and pain. She often told me: *aciara arĩra a thata arĩra* (Women who give birth sob and so do women who do not). Hence women should brace for painful experiences in their everyday struggles whether they have children or not. True to her word, I have experienced many painful instances in my life in the family and at work that have indeed made me sob.

In my adult life, as a woman, I have been a victim of the gender and class war in Nairobi. Thieves broke into my house on the 16th of December, 2004, three months after I had moved into Kahawa Sukari. They stole all my household furniture and utilities. As one of the thieves raped me, he taunted me: "You devil, who do you think you are? You are the women who are living off men and becoming rich."

I discovered that I was not just a sexualized body but a class-objectified body who was a target of anger and hate. The last thing the male thieves want to see is a woman who has defied the gendered norms and values that position women in the private spaces under male custodians. I am now allegedly in the class of the capitalists who thrive by exploiting labor, appropriating surplus, and living off men. I am now one of the loathed propertied class who according to Ngugi (1977) in *Petals of Blood* reap where they did not sow.

The incident also made me question the desire for women to claim equality with men. I did not want to use violence and intimidation like the men in my livelihood negotiation. I wanted my identity, values and norms of a woman and frame of doing things mainstreamed in everyday practices. The idea of a possibility of the existence of a feminist frame was spurred by the action of my women neighbors under the auspices of Nyahururu Taveta Women Association. They came to visit me after the incident in solidarity and prayer. They brought me foodstuff and money and consoled me. They encouraged me to forgive and not give up in life. They employed the feminine genius of negotiation, religion, nurturing, soothing and persuasion to calm an otherwise inconsolable situation. This is the true spirit of *ubuntu* (humanness) where two wrongs do not make a right. This is the strategy that women need to adopt while encountering the street and the public space. The gesture from the Nyahururu Taveta Women Association made me realize that there is something in women's logic, norms and values that I refer to as the feminine *utu*. This feminine *utu* can be used in negotiating everyday livelihood experiences. In my research and writing, I started looking for this feminine genius that has sustained many African communities in moments of adversity.

Gender and Feminism were not taught during my lifetime in Primary school, High school and university. This, however, is not unusual and most universities in Kenya prefer to have independent gender and development departments. Most geography departments concentrate on teaching human geography, geography of poverty and in a course, they may have a topic on women and poverty, or women and land issues. Apart from lower primary and university, I went to an all girls' school because it was believed that co-education affected girls' performance. In school, we were socialized to keep off boys lest they messed us up by impregnating us. In class, we would have debates challenging cultural practices that feminized gender roles. We used to debate topics like: 'Should girls be circumcised?', or 'A woman's place is in the kitchen.' During these debates, I was always in the opposing side. In the circumcision debate, I opposed the motion and argued that a girl gained nothing from circumcision. If anything, she lost blood and stopped schooling. I also opposed the idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen by arguing that there are jobs outside the kitchen which women can do very well.

In my undergraduate education, it was only Dr. Jennifer Riria Ouko who taught us a topic on women in education. Dr. Riria used to raise eyebrows because of her criticism of the heavily masculine tenor in everyday practices at the university and in the country. On my own initiative, I closely followed and received mentorship from distinguished Kenyan women such as Professor Agnes Musyoki, Professor Celia Nyamweru, Professor Maria Nzomo and Ms. Lydia Gaitirira in Kenya. Prof. Celia Nyamweru recommended my study at the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge while Prof. Agnes Musyoki introduced me to the International Geographical Union meeting and paid for my accommodation during its meeting in South Africa. Prof. Maria Nzomo introduced me to gender activism by recruiting me as a member of the National Status Committee for women where we sensitized women about their rights.

Most of my feminist ideas were acquired outside the formal school system by reading, attending conferences and mentoring. I joined my peers in the now defunct Association of African Women in Research and Development Kenya Chapter where we conducted gender-related research and seminars. Upon maturity in gender and feminist research, I became a trainer in Gender Research Methodology at AAWARD. In 2007, I attended the Heinrich Boll Foundation summer school on Engendering Economic Policies in a Globalizing World in Washington, DC. I had the privilege of listening to leading gender activists in economics such as Christa Wichterich of Women in Development (Europe), Corina Rodríguez Enríquez of Conicet (Argentina), Mariama Williams of IGTN/DAWN (Caribbean) and Mariana Durano of UNIFEM. I am inspired by and closely follow American womanist and feminist scholars and activists such as Janice Monk, Judith Butler, Alice Walker, Marta Chen and bell hooks, among others. I have benefitted from being in the IGU gender listserve, Geneva Writers Group, AMKA Space for Women, AAG panels on gender and visiting scholarships in places like UNRISD, Bellagio Rockefeller Center, Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study and the Five Colleges Women's Study Research Centre at Mount Holyoke, USA. In these places, I have kept up with current feminist and gender issues and built long lasting solidarities. At least I know that there are other women out there struggling with similar issues like mine. It is against this background that I have embarked on my journey towards becoming a feminist.

The geographer

My inquisitiveness and desire to know did not begin when I enrolled for a Master's Degree in Geography at the University of Nairobi. As far as I can remember, I was fascinated by the nature that surrounded me in my village in Ngethu. I would spend time looking at the flow of waters in rivers,

admiring the rising sun's bright yellow rays, watching the setting sun's orange rays, being awed by the moon and stars in the night sky and appreciating the hills and valleys. I wanted to know why roads run parallel to each other, why coffee was weighed, and why the storm water gushed down the hills. I wanted to know the meaning of the word 'manufactured' on wrappers and packaging. I yearned for the day I would understand why villagers so much revered Thika Town which was referred to as Gichuka or Weru. Geography, more than any other subject, seemed to satisfy my curiosity. I found topics such as towns, cash crops, the formation of the earth, stages of rivers and manufacturing very exciting. It is while I was in Form Two in high school that I decided Geography would be the subject worthy of my main pursuit.

Geography was the only subject that satisfied my curiosity. It answered my many questions about the existence of hills and valleys that I traversed every day as I went to the farm, to school, and to fetch water or firewood. It answered my curiosity and fascination with the sky and clouds. It explained the nature and origin of vegetation, bushes and forests which were part of my life in the village. It explained the movement of the sun which defined my day and my daily occupations. It explained coffee and tea farming and the choices which my community in Gatundu made for livelihood negotiation. Geography satisfied my fascination with Thika town, through urbanization and the products that came from there because of industrialization.

As I advanced in the study of Geography, I settled for 'economic geography.' Economic geography is the study of production and exchange activities in space. It discusses the functions and relationship between economic activities between entities and actors and gives them a spatial dimension. Economics looks at the impact of economic activities on GDP, employment, Purchasing Power Parity and Income per capita. Economic Geography looks at the spatial arrangements of these factors of production and exchange and their contribution and impact on making territorial complexes. How, for example, does industrialization shape the formations of cities and creation of inequalities between nations and regions? Why do investors make locational choices for their investments? How do these investments relate to other economic activities in the location? What synergies or diseconomies arise from the interaction of these economic activities in a place or region?

Feminist lecturer

After completing my Ph.D. in Geography at the University of Cambridge, I resumed my teaching job at Kenyatta University where I taught Geography of Development to a third-year class. My career as a female Geography

lecturer was however short-lived because my gender and sexuality became a factor in the classroom. My measures to inculcate discipline in class such as signing attendance forms, handing in assignments on time and involving orature as a source of knowledge, incensed learners who held that these measures were not for feminine staff. Male students would whistle when I walked in and make funny comments when female students presented their work. When I dared them to stop this behavior, they demonstrated against me the next day arguing that I was demeaning their manhood and didn't want to be taught by 'a mad woman who hates men.' The university administration sided with the students and relieved me of the class. Out of frustration and pain, I resigned from teaching and joined a research institute.

Feminist economic researcher and writer

In graduate school, my research did not take gender into account. My MA research work was on the location and structure of manufacturing industries in Thika while My PhD research was on small and medium-sized businesses in central Kenya. Both pieces of research focused on the way business and industry contribute to the construction of society and were gender blind. My first article on feminism was a book chapter entitled "Mainstreaming Gender in Kenya's Development Policy" (Kinyanjui 1999). I reviewed government documents to examine whether the development policy was gender sensitive. In the chapter, I envisioned the existence of a human social order where femininity and masculinity constituted the basic tenets of the regulatory framework for power relations and reduction of human conflict. The regulatory framework determined how male, female and other genders interacted and reached a consensus to facilitate the evolution of a thriving humanity. These rules, regulations, norms, philosophies and strategies influenced gender roles and methods of operation. They complemented rather than contradicted the behavior of each gender.

As a matter of interest, my focus in research shifted from formal businesses to informal ones. While transacting business in the informal activity for materials to construct my house, I discovered another side of the informal sector. I discovered things that I could not have gathered through the use of questionnaires, such as the formation of communities, community perceptions of wealth and well-being, the role of solidarity and the use of networks. I realized that formal businesses were not creating jobs. They were entrenching poverty in cities by paying workers low wages and putting them on casual contracts. In my study on the informal economy, I noticed that it was dominated by women traders, artisans and peasants. Women were making inroads into artisan work. These women's economic behavior and organization was different from that of the rational economic man I

read in textbooks. The women had great self-determination and self-reliance. This led me to focusing my study on the logic and institutional meaning of economic activities practiced by women.

The research process of women in economic informality is complicated by the marginalization and peripherization of economic informality in cities by policies and practice. Most often, violence and demolitions by authorities have been used to handle economic informality issues. This has made economic informality workers afraid to expose themselves to a stranger hence creating significant implications to my research process. For example, while men may explicitly talk about their business, women are likely to understate and underestimate their participation in economic informality. An Agikuyu woman may respond to a question such as: 'Why did you start a business?' by saying: '*Ndambĩrĩ irie nĩ getha nyonage handũ hagũtindaga*' (I started my business so that I can have a place to spend my time) or '*Ndambĩrĩ irie nĩ getha nyonage handũ ha Kũ nyihia mũthenya*' (I started the business so that I can shorten the day). The man, in contrast, will outrightly state: 'I started the business to make money.' I also noted that women navigate and configure economic informality to include their logic, norms and values in transactions and in their understanding of wellbeing. This led me to focus on the study of how women monetize their transactions and evolve both self and group regulations in their trade activities.

I debuted 'jua kali' (hot sun) as the name for the informal sector in Kenya in a study of the informal sector in a paper on capitalism development theory (Kinyanjui 2007). This was followed by another paper on "The Role of Informal Economy on Urban Dynamism" (Kinyanjui 2011). In this work, I observed how ideologies and tropes affect the participation of people in the informal economy (subalterns) in the cityscapes. This was followed by a paper on informal sector associations and how they are shaped by urbanization (Kinyanjui 2008). In the paper, I explored how informal economy workers formed associations that helped them in livelihood negotiations. I also demonstrated how the Nyahururu Taveta Women Association addressed the gender-specific needs of the urban women in the estate (Kinyanjui 2010). Other works that followed included 'Vyama, Institutions of Hope: Ordinary People's Strategies for Coordinating Marketing and Organizing Society (Kinyanjui 2012). I illustrated how *vyama* (social groups) are used for investment, social protection, savings and work in everyday livelihood struggles for overcoming material deprivation. I noted that informal economy workers used the collective agency to coordinate markets and organize society in an evolving urban environment. I also noted that women in economic informality had played a key role in the configuration of the informal economy

I followed the idea of collective action and women in economic informality. My first paper was: "Women Informal Garment Traders in Taveta Road,

Nairobi: From the Margins to the Center” (Kinyanjui 2013). The second was a book entitled: *Women in Economic Informality in Urban Africa: From the Margin to the Center* (Kinyanjui 2014). The third, also a book, was: *African markets: Utu Ubuntu Business Model, African Metropolis and Cultural Villages, being published by African Minds, Cape Town* (Kinyanjui 2019). Further analysis revealed that there is a close connection between African indigenous concepts of doing business in economic informality and the key roles women play in preserving these indigenous practices.

Women and men, as workers, toil together in economic informality. Women are making inroads in economic informality sectors such as metal work, vehicle repair and carpentry, where only men were involved. Similarly, in trades which were predominantly female, such as food marketing, men are slowly gaining entry while both men and women participate in garment making. Thus, one cannot study one gender and ignore the other because the women and men in economic informality are inextricably bound to each other in production and exchange (Kinyanjui 2011). In production, like the case of garment making, female entrepreneurs will hire male workers while in food marketing, the men are the transporters or suppliers. I have experienced significant challenges related to isolation, funding, theory, gender, language, justification of the research to the respondents and questionnaire administration in the research process.

Feminist activist

Besides research and writing, I have also been involved in gender as a feminist activist. In 1997, through the National Committee on Status of Women, I was actively involved in the promotion of Charity Kaluki Ngilu as a woman presidential candidate. I did workshops in Kitui and Wundanyi. In 2017, I was involved in sensitization and promotion of the woman parliamentary candidate in Gatundu North. I participated in a public *baraza* (gathering) where I spoke about gender issues and concerns in the constituency. I have been involved in encouraging parents to participate in their children’s education in the rural and informal settlements. Through such effort, we raised the mean score for both boys and girls in Igamba Primary School in Gatundu North from below 200 in 2007 to 274 in 2015.

Adversity and challenges have not hindered my efforts to be a feminist geographer and gender activist in the community. I have strived to remain strong and focused on my goal. My efforts have been supported by friends and colleagues in and outside the academy. My journey was supported by many people, family and friends, who offered accommodation while attending conferences, editing my work or just giving me moral support to pursue my course in the *utu ubuntu* spirit. They include Felix, Lucy Kiruthu, Jane

Wairimu, Josephine, Kamiti, Mercy Nyambura and Josephat Juma, among others. Evidence from the three universities and my personal experience of becoming a feminist geographer calls for more activism and feminist policies in Kenyan universities. It also calls for establishing links, collective action and support from geography departments where feminism is well developed.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the support given by Jennifer Hamilton of the Five College Studies Research Center Mount Holyoke for discussions held on the paper. I also wish to acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers, Mr. Josephat Juma and Paul Mutuku for logistical support in the writing of this paper. Finally, I acknowledge support to Pamela Moss for formatting the document and for grammar and syntax editing. Any errors in the work are mine.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Mary Njeri Kinyanjui is a writer, researcher, teacher, community organizer volunteer and a firm believer in social economic justice and self-reliance. She is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi. She holds a PhD in Geography from Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge. She has completed research on economic informality, grassroots and indigenous institutions in the organization of economic behavior, small business, gender and trade justice and peasant organizations. Her current research is on the positioning of women peasants, artisans and traders in the global economy. Currently she is a visiting associate at the Five Colleges Women Studies Research Center, Mount Holyoke

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