

Alternative pathways for women and children

By Anastasia Prikhodko

A key theme of the conference was identifying alternative pathways for a future of development. One session in particular was examining alternative pathways for women and children.

Nicole Roger and Di Kilsby explored the ideology of gender in early childhood development in Uganda. Their research was based on finding out the perceptions children, parents and caregivers had regarding gender, and seeing the children 'perform' their gender through socializing in various environments.

Preschool, primary school and the home were the different environments used to analyse children performing their gendered roles.

An interesting aspect discussed is that of competition between mothers and fathers – specifically, fathers wanting to defend their roles as caregivers, providers and protectors.

'Men's roles are quite weak in terms of encouraging children with their education – in reality, they do very little', explained Di Kilsby.

For mothers, it is important that girls are 'trained' to be good wives and mothers, however they also want their daughters to have a better life than what they had.

'Apart from behaviour, children should be treated in the same way. There are behaviours for boys and girls, which are always different,' Nicole Rodger quoted one caregiver.

Evidently, caregivers also feel obliged to prepare children for responsibility and to raise them appropriately for the engendered cultural roles.

By the time the children started preschool, they already have a rounded idea of what girls and boys are and are not allowed to do. The children were also asked what they would like to do or enjoy doing.

Di Kilsby related to the group how a little girl told researchers very wistfully how she really wanted to climb a tree. However, there is a very strong social prohibition on climbing a particular kind of tree because the girls are told if they climb that tree it will die, and it's an important source of fruit.

From an early age, girls are beginning to discover their gendered cultural boundaries.

Ultimately, as the children got older their gender specific roles became more regulated, and the children began enacting traditional behaviours of femininity and masculinity.

Nicole Rodger explained that she would like to use the research as an opportunity to identify gender and to understand what we can do to make our programs more gender responsive, more gender aware and – ultimately – gender transformative.

The researchers recommended a range of approaches to help increase gender attentiveness as well as alternative pathways for girls and boys growing up in Uganda, including:

- Exposure to other opportunities to create awareness;
- An increase of father participation; and
- Providing education about gender to children, parents and caregivers.

'Over 50 years we have been governed by a military government and we continue to live in a patriarchal society,' said Nang Phyu Phyu. She is a young woman from Myanmar; her talk showcased the current struggle of women in her hometown.

Phyu Phyu's discussion presented a different outlook on a woman's situation compared to Australia. Despite the lead figure towards democracy in Myanmar being played by a woman, leadership roles continue to be defined by gender and culture. With men being viewed as natural leaders, women are expected to stay at home, take care of children and to not share their views.

'Women act as the supporters,' explained Ms. Phyu Phyu.

Early exposure to politics and injustice, the desire to struggle against prevailing inequalities, and stereotypes blocking women's paths into leadership roles are aspects which have influenced an increasing number of young women actively attempting to create change and participating in leadership roles.

However, gender issues continue to prevail in Myanmar, and gender-based violence, including intimidation, verbal, physical violence and sexual harassment, is often used to stop women from public expression and advocacy.

'Business leaders and parliamentarians are least likely to talk about gender discrimination,' said Ms. Phyu Phyu.

Gender inequality in Myanmar – and similarly in Uganda – are often seen as separate to other forms of equality, and secondary in importance.

After Dr. Joel Negin's introduction, a few laughs and whispers followed.

He started by asking, 'are we targeting the wrong people with our well meaning interventions?' His discussion was to be on the role of the mother in law.

A few murmurs followed.

Jokes and derision surrounding the mother in law are born out of a perceived pervasive authority, influence and power, explained Dr. Negin.

Interestingly – and shockingly – a study found that in China; the mother-in-law was the most common perpetrator of domestic violence, apart from the husband or boyfriend, against women who have recently given birth. This is a phenomenon that is often ignored – Dr Negin noted that we tend to stop counting people past the age of 49.

Dr Negin suggested an approach to this problem which is not limited to this issue alone: 'make everyone count by counting everyone'.

