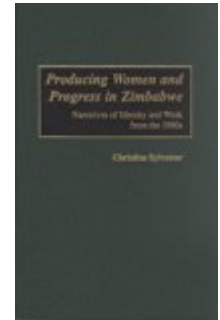


Christine Sylvester. *Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe: Narratives of Identity and Work from the 1980s.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. xii + 277 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-325-00070-1.



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"In, around, and between the pronouncements of many, 'women' narrated common and differential experiences with 'production' and their own self-defined 'progress.' They were not violently claiming the earth, nor were their experiences of everyday powerlessness being overcome to the point of establishing alternative regimes of truth. To see small steps as large movements would be to stretch the experiences too far Nonetheless, efforts to tug at the parameters of gender revealed the beginnings of many potentially viable 'truths' about 'women agricultural producers.' We will not be able to see and appreciate those tugs as long as we call certain people women without thinking twice about what that means for the subjects so named, for the power relations that swirl around them, and for the production programs through which they and their families are meant to progress" (p. 243).

The latest book on Zimbabwe by the Australian-based feminist and political scientist, Christine Sylvester, offers an insightful, theoretically creative, and overtly political examination of the performance of gender and class in Zimbabwe

in the 1980s. She draws on theoretical tools within and beyond feminism in diverse fields such as language and performance, international development, narrative theory, political economy, and postcolonialism. In so doing, Sylvester asks her readers to hesitate in assuming the self-evident nature of key analytical (and everyday) categories of "women," "progress," and "production" and attend to the conflicts and tensions surrounding the historical application and embodiment of these terms in various work sites in Zimbabwe during its first decade of independence. She puts these terms in quotation marks to highlight how they are not readily defined but permanently under construction and dispute.

Her argument and her style (as exemplified in the epigraph) may bother those who find analyses informed by "post-" literature as unrealistic or irrelevant to African development issues.[1] However, I think that this book deserves attention for its theoretical nuances and her close analysis of the multiple dimensions of struggles surrounding production and gender in 1980s Zimbabwe.

Although Sylvester only makes passing references to events in the 1990s, the approach she uses has much to offer in analysing current events punctuating the lives of so many Zimbabweans today. Moreover, in contrast to some practitioners of "post-" approaches, Sylvester writes engagingly, bringing many strands of her multi-layered argument together into a coherent and reader-friendly manner.

The book eloquently weaves together numerous sources to present a nuanced view of gender and class struggles, including those over the meanings of these very terms. These sources include: interviews she carried out with Zimbabwean women in different production fields (urban factory work, commercial farming, urban co-operatives, smallscale farming) and with those having social power in those fields (such as managers, foremen, union officials, donor representatives) in the late 1980s; her observations of the relations and conflicts within those production processes; passages from Zimbabwean novels; references from a wide range of secondary literature; and Sylvester's own theoretical and critical observations. She argues that different understandings of "progress," messages about what the ideal and proper woman (and man) should be, are strong influences in shaping the actions of women at work. Whereas most of these understandings are transnational in nature (e.g. liberal, Marxist, development), they are recast through localized aims and constructs. Borrowing the term "glocalization" from Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt, Sylvester situates the words and actions of the Zimbabweans she interviews and observes within transnational and national processes and debates about development, gender, and labour. [2]

After introducing her argument and laying out her theoretical and methodological assumptions in the first chapter, she traces some of the key regimes of truth, production relations, and policies shaping the ideas and institutional ar-

rangements concerning women and progress in the country up to the end of the 1980s. This chapter sets the stage for her closer examination of how progress for women is defined and contested in the four different production sites.

In each case study, she begins with a condensed overview of that production site and the institutions that have some influence on labour and gender relations in it. She then examines how those with social power within that site (such as management, donors, trade unions, NGOs, worker committees, civil servants) define women and men in that setting of production and points out the ambiguities and contradictions within those pronouncements and in terms of observed practices. The emphasis of each chapter is an analysis of how these regimes of truth interact with the varied ways in which the women themselves define progress in that production site. She concludes each chapter with a brief discussion of possible ways to assist these women in their struggles.

For example, managers at the clothing and food processing industries in Harare told her that women workers were generally better and more reliable workers than men. However, at the same time, they claimed that the weaker physiques, biologies and the lack of ambition of the women in combination with discriminatory attitudes held by male co-workers prevented them from giving women higher-paid and more skilled jobs. In the gaps of these contradictory evaluations, Sylvester points out that she came across women workers periodically using a factory's sewing machines to do their own domestic sewing, defiantly claiming that this practice was a form of compensation for the un-enforced legal right mothers have for breast-feeding young children at work. She also speculates on whether an organizational body geared towards helping women in the work-place, given the androcentric bias of existing worker organizations, could be of use to women workers.

The common theme of each of her case studies, which she emphasizes in her own concluding chapter, is that the fixed identifications for women constituted by the powerful were not completely hegemonic: women put forward alternatives in words and deeds to subvert, challenge, and play with these meanings. But, at the same time, the ways in which the women she interviewed extended the identity of "women" in their lives and aspirations were not powerful. They were not creating a new regime of truth for gender relations—they were not, in other words, building a new movement to challenge the existing hierarchies.

Sylvester's position, her own hope in terms of progress for Zimbabwean women, is that development practitioners, feminists, and others who seek to improve the situation of women producers shed their own fixed meaning of what it means to be a (Zimbabwean) woman, recognizing the varied meanings of "women" within the different production sites and the hidden tactics taken to help support or achieve such meanings.

For this reviewer, the only weakness of this book is the lack of attention towards other important informing discourses of gender which others have discussed for Zimbabwean women. Cultural models of gender relations promoted by leaders and prophets of various Christian denominations, ethnic entrepreneurs, advocates of tradition(s), to name but a few, often intermingle with those promoted by managers, donors, and the like, influencing Zimbabwean women workers' self-understandings and stances towards women and men and towards "progress" itself. Perhaps due to the limitations inherent in using interview information to ascertain the wishes and self-understandings of informants (which, of course, befalls many of us [3]), Sylvester portrays the struggles of Zimbabwean women producers as hinging mainly around topics that speak to more secular international and glocalized dialogues and debates on gender and labour rights and international devel-

opment. This is explicitly marked by her pointing out the similarities of the ideas of the various women she interviews to positions like liberal-pragmatism, GAD (Gender and Development), socialist-feminism, etc. Such a translation is relevant in trying to inform positions and programs promoted by development practitioners and/as feminists. But omitting other informing models and practices that do not easily fit the norms of such transnational discourses would limit, I suspect, effective solidarities being built with these Zimbabwean women workers.

Nonetheless, Sylvester does provide significant insight into gender struggles in Zimbabwean production sites of the 1980s, the "glocalized" discourses informing policies then and now, while giving a much needed caution against "experts" being blinded by their/our own narrow assumptions. This last point, in particular, is of great relevance to understanding on-going events in Zimbabwe today. The firm lines taken by the polarizing sides over the Crisis in Zimbabwe tend to miss out the heterogeneous responses, informed by an increasing desperation, of Zimbabwean women and men to the politicized land invasions, the accompanying and expanding violence, and growing economic crisis in the country. While an examination of such multiple and often ambiguous steps of Zimbabweans during this political and economic crisis tends to undermine some of the certainties used by the national and international advocates of the polarized sides, the assumptions of the powerful are not easily shaken.[4] But books like *Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe* are important precisely since they indicate how those subjected to varied modalities of power are not motionless victims while, at the same time, they indicate ways for other forms of progress, possibly, to emerge.

Notes

[1]. For example, responding to an earlier publication by Christine Sylvester in which she follows a similar analysis of Zimbabwean women,

Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison suggest that by destabilizing the meaning of "women" in Zimbabwe Sylvester is unable to locate common sources of oppression and existing solidarities. They claim she denies "the concrete conditions under which women clearly are women, and have shared experiences of both material and symbolic subordination, in access to resources, to land, to control over their own bodies, and so on" (Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison, *Whose Development? An Ethnography of Aid* (London: Zed Books, 1998), p. 189).

[2]. Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt, "Editorial Note: Creating Glocality." *Development*, 1998, 41(2).

[3]. See, for example, Charles Briggs, *Learning how to ask; a sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4]. See, for example, the special issue "The New Agrarian Politics in Zimbabwe," edited by Eric Worby in the *Journal of Agrarian Change* (Vol. 1, No. 4, 2001), and papers presented at the conference "The Zimbabwe Crisis" hosted by the Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, 3-5 September 2001 (<http://www.cdr.dk/seminars/zimbabwe/>). Some of these papers will be coming out in a book *Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State, and Citizenship in Zimbabwe*, edited by Amanda Hammar, Brian Raftopoulos, and Stig Jensen (Harare: Weaver Press).

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