"Nowadays there is Gender": 'Doing' Global Gender Equality in Rural Malawi

Abstract

This article analyzes the intersection of psychology with global development policy and practice, reviewing how "gender" as a concept is negotiated and understood amongst men and women in rural Malawi. We argue that "gender," considered from a psychological perspective, has been narrowed down to meet the standards of global policy actors. By empowering individuals to "self-actualize," policy implementers expect social and economic spin-off effects such as lower birth rates, higher education levels and poverty reduction. The focus on individuals acts to obscure the broader structural power inequities, especially prevalent in rural Malawi. To explain this, we use Haslam's idea of "concept creep," on how psychological concepts tend to affect other institutional traditions. The everyday understandings of gendered life described here show how "gender" is a fluid concept that shifts according to cultural, social and ideological norms.

Keywords: Gender, concept creep, global development policy, Malawi, sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Psychological expertise is increasingly integrated in the global development context (Howell, 2011). This psychosocial paradigm shift is generally said to have originated in the 1990s (De Vos, 2012), motivated by what Pupavac (2004, p. 495) calls the "crisis of legitimacy" in humanitarian aid and what Fassin (2008, p. 539) characterizes as "the politics of suffering" in recognition of mental health issues such as PTSD in conflict areas.

The global aid sector was criticized for disrupting local economies and firing up conflicts in the regions where it operated, resulting in a demoralization of humanitarian organizations. Aid agencies were encouraged "to adopt psychosocial work" and to "bring back the human in the face of the bureaucratization of aid, foregrounding how people and communities personally experience disaster of conflict" (Pupavac, 2004, pp. 496-497). Since the 1990s, development donors and aid agencies have promoted the turn to "psychosocial programs" (Pupavac, 2004, p. 496), as reflected in a greater psychosocial focus on individual behavior (Howell, 2011). The incorporation of psychological concepts such as "agency," "empowerment," "behavioral change," "resilience," "self-efficacy," "self-actualization" is evident in development policy and practice (De Vos, 2011; E. B. Klein, P., 2018; Pupavac, 2004). The year 2015 marked a historic milestone in the recognition of mental health: the annual World Development Report of the World Bank had a specific focus on "Mind, Society and Behavior," and both the UN Sendai Framework and the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included mental health and well-being in their strategic plans (Izutsu et al., 2015). Psychological concepts and practices have come to play a key role in the construction and

implementation of global development policies. However, the current embrace of psychological discourses and expertise within the field of development disciplines "remains largely undefined, untheorized and unproblematized" (Klein & Mills, 2017, p. 1991). This article focuses on how "gender," here understood mainly as a psychological concept, pervades the global development discourse and is transferred, reconstructed, and manifested on local levels in rural Malawi, in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender is increasingly recognized as entailing multiple power relations; this approach has—unsurprisingly, "given the highly individualistic focus of psychology as a field"—been little explored (Stewart, 2004, p. 522).

Here we note Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5): to achieve "gender equality and empower all women and girls" as a main mean for eradicating global inequity. In Malawi, with its high rates of gender-based violence, child marriages, unintended teenage pregnancies, and girls dropping out of school, this policy is especially campaigned in its developmental context (Ministry of Gender, 2013).

Background

In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations Millennium Summit Conference in New York with the wide-ranging vision of, among other goals, providing worldwide education and ending global poverty by 2015. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) derived from this campaign, all targeting different international development agendas. In announcing MDG3, "gender equality and the empowerment of women" became a top-priority development objective. This approach was nothing new as such: the "gender turn" had been employed by global development actors since the 1970s (Jackson & Pearson, 2005). However, the "Smart

Economics" of the late1990s intensified the joint effects of pairing gender equality with economic development (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). In the wake of the MDG3 agenda, international, state, and non-state organizations followed up by passing various motions supporting the approach (Chaaban & Cunningham, 2011; Temin & Levine, 2009). A new discursive field promoting agency, self-efficacy, and individual freedom emerged (Hickel, 2014). In 2009, the US-based Center for Global Development (Temin & Levine, 2009) issued the report "Start with a Girl: A New Agenda for Global Health," urging donors and civil society organizations to scale up their work on addressing girls' well-being—which, it was assumed, would serve to accelerate economic and social development. Declarations like "Women and girls are one of the world's greatest untapped resources and a terrific return on investment" (Quinn, 2010) and "Help empower women around the world to reach their full potential" (H. International, 2017) came to dominate the development discourse (Hickel, 2014; Switzer, 2016). In 2015, following up the MDGs, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring the previous strategy and adding a more ambitious, integrated and extended list of goals and sub-targets. With SDG5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," the agenda further established the next 15 years of global focus on women and gender in development discourse and implementation. Many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) adapted programs specifically focused on women and girls (Girl Effect, 2018; P. International, 2017; International, 2016).

Several international organizations maintain that empowering Global South women is necessary to eradicate global poverty (Chaaban & Cunningham, 2011; UNICEF, 2015).

However, critics, opposing the discontinuity between vision and ideology, fear that this approach ignores the structural drivers of poverty, such as poor public services, lack of infrastructure, "debt, tax evasion, labor exploitation, financial crisis and corruption in the global governance system" (Hickel, 2014, p. 1356), and ignores the social, political, and economic rights of women and girls (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Klein (2016) maintains that hollow slogans like "gender equality" and "empowerment" obscure the power processes of neoliberalism and colonialism. Further, Boyd (2016, p. 150) argues: "'gender equality' is being discursively instrumentalized as an expedient for development and together, re-instrumentalized as an alibi for economic growth." By turning the women of the Global South into "entrepreneurial subjects" (Koffman & Gill, 2013, p. 89), development agencies and NGOs hope they will serve as catalysts for economic growth (Calkin, 2016; Hickel, 2014), seeing them as the "means to development rather than as ends in and of themselves" (Moeller, 2014, p. 577). However, there have been few studies on how psychological expertise and concepts are applied in the field of global development (Klein & Mills, 2017). Further, although scholars and civil society organizations have questioned the discourse of "gender equality" and "empowerment" in context of the global policy framework, they have "usually stopped short of reflection on how these concepts have acquired their meanings" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 399). In this study, we aim to improve this situation by focusing on psychological conceptions of "gender," seeing empowerment as a tool to achieve gender equality.

The Malawian Context

Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries. With more than 60% of its total health expenditure financed by donor aid (Chansa, 2018) and a high presence of international

NGOs, it has been called a "donor darling" (Koch, 2007, p. 1) and a "NGO-mania" (Kloster, 2015). These organizations contextualize and display global development policies such as the SDG5 through campaigns, conferences, interventions, and the mass media. Impoverished rural Malawi provides an environment where many of these policies are carried out. This context also offers a setting that helps nuance how psychological concepts such as "gender" permeate broader development objectives, and how the concept is understood and contextualized locally.

Most of the participants in this study of two rural Malawian communities are of the ethnic Yao group, mainly Muslim and living in the south of Malawi; some are a mix of Chewa, Ngoni and Lomwe, generally adhering to Christianity. Yao communities follow a matrilineal marriage system, traditional in the southern regions, where rights to property are secured by daughters inheriting their mothers' land (Kishindo, 2004). On marriage, men move to the natal villages of their wives; in case of divorce, they are the ones who move, leaving the land and property to the wife (Verheijen, 2013). Nevertheless, as women are traditionally excluded from the labor market; they do the unpaid domestic work, and thus have to rely on men for economic support (Verheijen, 2013).

On the national level, "gender equality" is established within the state constitution and women's "empowerment" is institutionalized. The Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Welfare, as well as key funders, international NGOs, and the mass media all stress "empowerment" as imperative for enabling women and girls to get an education, engage in family planning, acquire agency, and achieve independence (Ministry of Gender, 2013). In the Chichewa language, "gender" is translated as "not differentiating between men and women at work." And as Riley and Dodson (2016, p.

1050) point out, the term "gender" has developed "as a ChiChewa word in its own right,
even appearing in a dictionary as "'jenda' with an annotation that it is originally an
English word, translated as "gender equality." Thus, in Malawi "gender" is constructed as
a practice people *do* to reduce gender inequity.

Theoretical Tool: Concept Creep

Haslam (2016) offers a useful framework—*concept creep*—for explaining the semantic
changes that several psychological concepts have undergone, involving both vertical and
horizontal expansions, where the altered meanings have "looping effects on how people
make sense of themselves personally and collectively" (Haslam, 2016, p. 2). In this
process, concepts continue to refer to the original phenomena while they, quantitatively
and qualitatively, are expanded to include a new range of additional phenomena. Based
on Haslam's theoretical framework, we discuss "gender" as an instance of *concept creep*.
The elastic meanings of "gender" as presented in this article may be understood as
expanding, both vertically and horizontally, and include looping effects on individuals'
self-understanding in the societal contexts where the concept is introduced.

Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted by the first author together with a research
assistant, here referred to as "Mercy." Mercy has extensive research experience, and
speaks both Chiyao and Chichewa, the major languages in the area. The fieldwork,
conducted in the rural south of Malawi between April and August 2017, was based on
informal interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with

villagers. The normal ethical standards were followed: research permits, informed consent, anonymity.

Setting: The research site is a rural agricultural area with two neighboring villages. The district was selected and approved in collaboration with the local authorities, chosen on the basis of certain criteria: a mixed ethnic population, economic hardship, poor infrastructure, low school enrollment, high level of school drop-outs, early marriage and unintended teenage pregnancies (Bureau, 2014)—all targeted by NGOs conducting gender-equality programs and interventions. Members of the community informed of the research project by the village chiefs.

Participants: Most participants were to the Yao ethnic group; the remainder were a mix of Chewa, Ngoni and Lomwe. Ages ranged from 18 to above 50: this allowed for political and societal changes such as law reforms, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, governmental and NGO interventions, to be put in different life contexts. Participants live primarily from farming, small business and piecework; households are large, with four to eight children; nine out of ten households cook on wood, and only 5% have access to electricity (Unlimited, 2009). Most of our informants had never enrolled in primary school, or had dropped out. Further, most of them reported that they suffered from high levels of poverty and struggled to cover their basic needs—food, medicines, clothes, and school fees.

Data collection: Informal interviews, FGDs and in-depth interviews were chosen, as these methods are generative for studying people's experiences and understandings of social phenomena within a given cultural context (Mason, 2002). Altogether 34 informal interviews, five FGDs and six in-depth interviews were conducted. For 14 weeks prior to

the arrival of the first author, Mercy paid daily visits to the villages: this gave the

community a chance to get informed and develop an understanding of us and the project.

Mercy's interaction in everyday talks and tasks helped to create mutual trust between us

and the communities, enabling us to work *within* the local context. We also hoped that

this   would lessen the possibility of our objectives getting confused with the work of

NGOs in the area. As each household was involved, the 34 informal interviews created a

data foundation that informed us about a population who answered to the same chief and

were targeted by the same NGOs. Because that NGO "gender equality" programs

primarily target women and girls, the first author and Mercy agreed to focus on creating

contact with female community members. Of the 34 informal interviews, 24 were

conducted with women. These interviews were organic, intuitive and dependent on

aspects such as the availability and willingness of community members. Often Mercy

helped out with daily duties while chatting about their everyday life: there was no

specific time structure. The intention was to engage with and acknowledge all

households, and to build a sample based on informants who might later be interested in

elaborating and sharing experiences and thoughts in dialogue with us. Participants were

asked to participate in FGDs based on information from the informal interviews and

preceding discussions with Mercy on topics that included experiences with development,

gender, empowerment, NGOs, marriage, divorce, schooling, dropping out of school.

None of these topics or terms were explained or defined by us in advance.

　　The FGDs, as well as the informal and in-depth interviews, were guided by questions

such as "what is development?", "how do you understand 'gender'?", "is 'gender'

something you do or something you have?", "can you explain the word

'empowerment'?", "do you follow cultural practices?" Here, "empowerment" and "cultural practices" served to trigger discussions on "gender," as these topics are widely used in NGO interventions; however they are not the object for analysis as such in this article. The FGDs were composed of men, women, and young adults of both genders gathered separately. This dynamic was selected in order to encompass the nuances in individual experiences and understandings of gender and generations. The dividing of gender and age presumably reduced potential hierarchy effects between young adults and middle-aged men and women. Before starting the FGDs, we introduced the research project and ourselves. Participants joined voluntarily, and all signed an informed consent. We conducted two mixed-gender FGDs with young adults—three men and three women. The two women-only FGDs involved four, respectively six, participants; and one FGD was conducted with five men. Next, participants from each focus group were invited to in-depth interviews, based on their experience and interest in the topics discussed. The six in-depth interviews involved three men and three women. All FGDs and in-depth interviews were scheduled in advance and were held in the local community building; all lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim in English. In the interviews and FGDs, the first author asked the questions in English. These were translated into Chichewa and/or Chiyao by Mercy, who then wrote down the replies. These were immediately translated into English, and the first author asked follow-up questions in English.

Analysis: We conducted a "theoretical" thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is both theoretically flexible and suited for research on less-studied topics such as local people's conceptions of the gendered development discourse, and its impact on the

social and relational context in their communities. Because of language and cultural differences, we found that this approach allowed us to code the material for explicit research questions such as "how does gender-interventions change local perceptions or/and behaviour?" using a semantic level that centered on the broader meanings of the themes. The FGDs were situated in a context where the participants had shared experiences of everyday life, so there was little variation in the level of reciprocal understanding about the themes. For example, most participants explained "gender" in noticeably similar ways and spoke of similar experiences regarding the impact of "gender".

After thorough and repeated readings of the transcripts, all material was coded into NVivo 11 and organized under thematic titles. Relevant excerpts were gathered under titles and sub-titles, and central themes (such as "the role of men/women," "doing/not doing gender") were identified and conceptualized. This thematic ranking was further moderated and reduced, to sharpen the focus. In the analysis below, we illustrate the themes with representative statements made by participants, to indicate the broader reoccurring patterns in the material. Pseudonyms are used for the names of participants cited in quotes.

Patterns and Themes

Generally, participants agreed that "gender" is part of development, often referring to this "gender" as brought in by various NGOs operating development programs in the villages. Most participants saw the shift to "gender" as related to work and daily practices previously tied to separate gendered roles, such as construction work, farming, and cooking, washing, cleaning. Of the initial 34 informal interviews, 30 generally defined

"gender" as a man and woman working together in activities like construction, farming, digging, cooking and childcare. This understanding of "gender" was further confirmed in the FGDs and in-depth interviews. This quote from "Ernest" illustrates the "gender" message NGOs communicate to the village members: "Most of them say there should be no difference between men's work and women's work." Thus, "gender" could be understood in line with the translation of "gender" as "not differentiating between men and women at work" and the Chichewan "jenda" translated as "gender equality."

Five recurrent themes and negotiations were identified: men and "nowadays there is gender"; women and "gender" nowadays; doing/not doing "gender"; "there is no 'gender' in this village"; and "'gender' and witchcraft." These themes capture the complex, contextual and sometimes conflicting ideas about what "gender" can represent in the everyday life of rural Malawi. However, these constructions of "gender" also illuminate and challenge the wider "gender" discourse outside rural Malawi which sees "gender" as universal, general and individual. We hold that "gender" has undergone what Haslam (2016) calls "concept creep." Using accounts from village participants, we will show how "gender" has expanded horizontally and vertically, with qualitatively and quantitatively changed meanings of gender.

Men and "Nowadays there is Gender"

Although the vast majority of participants were positive to "gender," indicating that it made life better, opinion varied as to whether and to what extent "gender" works. The following quotes show how male (fictively named) participants perceive "gender" as communicated by NGOs:

Blessings: When NGOs come with some work in the village they speak of

gender, saying that nowadays there is gender so let us all participate in

this, or let's work together, men and women—so we started to understand

Happy: Maybe men were selfish, thinking "a woman cannot do this while

I can," but the NGOs they have helped us to start to understand what

"gender" is. We can say that it starts from the high level, and then comes

to the low level, because it has come from you people [the first

author/Mercy]

These men mention the encouragement from NGOs when bringing "gender" to the

villages as being something new. Further, "the high level" and "you people" refers to the

first author and Mercy, a white woman and an English speaking Malawian woman. This

notion stresses the characteristics of "gender" as coming from people different from

them. In addition, "gender" is made to meaning something that can be "understood" with

help from others, from people from outside the villages. Not doing "gender" is seen as

egoistic—and selfishness can be argued to oppose the African cosmological and

philosophical principle of *Ubuntu* (Ashforth, 2005a; Gade, 2011; Holdstock, 2013;

Venter, 2004). *Ubuntu* implies "a person is a person through other people" (Ashforth,

2005a, p. 85); the Malawian *uMunthu* is defined by Bandawe (2010, p. 19) "I am because

you are, and because you are, therefore I am." Further, "If a person acts selfish, rough

and cruel he is said to possess bad spirits" (Layman, 2002, p. 30). Selfishness is culturally

rejected as something disturbing and disruptive (Lwanda, 2004). To think of oneself first,

and not think of others, finds scant approval in a culture where people, often due to

poverty, must depend on the compassion and generosity of others (Swidler, 2013). These

men see "gender" more as a perspective, a principle, a practice and a way of living, desirable also for its moral aspects. Consequently, "gender" can be conceived as a *method* that can be thought and learned.

Women and "Gender" Nowadays

Also women see "gender" as something extraneous and new, which they highlight with concrete examples of how "gender" has been opening up new ways of dealing with the mundane tasks of everyday life.

> *Tamanda:* If you see a man going to fetch water or if the women are talking about themselves they say, "there is gender nowadays"

> *Lindiwe:* Look at those women cutting down a tree—*that* is gender. Felling trees used to be work for men, but now even women can do it.

> *Dorothy:* In the past there was some work that was especially for women, and some work for men—but when gender came, that's when we started working together

Changes in the division of labor have shown these women that daily practices that used to be only for woman / only for men have with the coming of "gender" become shared work that both men and women can do. "Gender" came, opening up new ways of doing life that these women appreciate.

Similarly, in one focus group:

> *First author:* What is the best thing about gender?

Alysha: It helps you to know what you are doing and also where you are.

Best of all, when you don't have money you can know that "ok I can do

this on my own without paying [a man] to do it"

Fredah: it [gender] is everywhere all over the world. Now people are

realizing "oh! This is not only for men, we can do it, too," and so it is

everywhere.

Olivia: Other people think that some jobs are for men only, but that's not

true, they are for both men and women. Building a bathroom, for

example—if we get divorce we can do things like that on our own.

Women speak of "gender" as something we can be made aware of and can understand.

They point out how "doing gender" makes them less vulnerable and more independent.

This new-found agency is appreciated as being empowering and liberating.

Thus, according to these women, "gender" seems to have the intended effect of gender

equality that policymakers and NGOs promote. On the whole, the general impression was

that "gender" makes life easier.

Doing and not Doing Gender

According to West and Zimmerman (1987) "gender" is not something we are or have, but

something we decide to do, repeatedly, again and again on an everyday basis. This in turn

gives rise to the question, "can we ever *not* do gender?" (1987, p. 137).

In these villages, the concept of "gender" is in line with West and Zimmerman's

(1987) view of being something "we *do*".

> *Kennedy:* We have gender in the village, we do work together with
>
> women
>
> *Ernest:* Even at school, they always put them [pupils] together a boy and a
>
> girl, saying that "it is gender, you need to be doing gender"
>
> *Alysha*: You can even see men even pounding maize meal like women do,
>
> so that's part of gender.

 These statements illustrate the broad consensus among participants that "gender" is a "doing" that involves sharing responsibilities and work. "Gender" is for everyone, and can be "done" together. In other words, in these villages, "gender" is not seen as something we "do" alone, but is negotiated as a collective "doing" to benefit collective goods, such as time- and money saving practices, help, care and support with child raising. However, "gender" is also mentioned as something that is *not* done. Happy, a young male focus group participant explains how "gender" is not done:

> Like here at the village, normally they [NGOs] focus on girls only, not
>
> only the boys. They [the boys] don't get jealous, they just accept that is
>
> what the NGOs have decided. That is not part of gender, had it really been
>
> gender it could have been helping both men and women.

NGOs play a major role in the communication of global- and national development policies. Women's equality, education for girls, and gender mainstreaming has long been a primary goal of the government and many international and national NGOs in Malawi. In the pursuit of gender equality their interventions have often focus solely on women and girls, as highlighted in the quote above. Our participants see "gender" as a value that is supposed to benefit everyone, but, as Happy notes, the one-sided focus on girls "is not

part of gender." He sees "gender" as a *common* interest, so excluding the one sex is "not gender." What he notes is the discrepancy between what NGOs *say*, promoting gender, and what NGOs actually *do*, focusing only on girls. Policy implementers and NGOs contradict themselves and create ambiguous meanings of what "gender" involves, by constructing gender categories that constrain and reinforce the unequal dichotomy they were designed to open up.

Failing to Do "Gender"

Men and women alike see "gender" and "doing gender" as benefitting both sexes. However, the greater focus on girls and school attendance may end up having negative effects on girls' self-esteem and their perceptions of themselves.

> *Fredah:* Mostly they [NGOs] want them [girls] to continue their studies so that they shouldn't get pregnant quickly, that's why they focus a lot on the girls.

Fredah went on to explain that women alone are seen as being responsible for their pregnancies, and many female participants report being deserted by their husbands and left with full responsibility for their children. When schoolgirls get pregnant, it often results in their dropping out of school in order to care for their child.

Gladys, a 19-year-old schoolgirl, further elaborates on why this is problematic:

> They [girls] feel they tried and failed (…) they get pregnant, and maybe sometimes they might just lack some food, sometimes they lack soap or body lotion and then they decide to drop out. They just stay in the village. It's the woman who has a problem, she's the one carrying the baby, while

the man is just free, he does not have to do anything. Maybe that's why

boys go to school but girls don't.

Participants speak of dropping out of school as signifying failure; *"just staying"* is a common expression amongst youth referring to their inability to get on with their lives (Classen, 2013). Mary, a 25-year-old single mother, describes this existential dilemma:

I'd always been a good girl, very quiet, and had turned 25 without having

a boyfriend. This was my first one. He just got me pregnant, ignored the

responsibility. Because of the pregnancy I was very weak and tired and

failed to help my mother with selling her donuts at the market, so I did not

have any success last year

In the above excerpts, the obligations connected to "gender" cause a quandary. Because of governmental and NGO incentives, with their strong focus on keeping girls in school, becoming pregnant and dropping out are associated with failure. Informants report that there is now a law: if a girl gets pregnant and drops out, she or the parents will have to pay a fine to the village chief or local police. In a society where assets and money are scarce, a fine not only signals misconduct, it also has direct economic implications. With the pressure from society and various NGOs, the individual agency and behavior of girls become everybody's business. Additionally, with this focus, NGOs implicitly communicate that girls are responsible and accountable for their reproductive behavior. Thus, contradictory to the greater equality that gender interventions are intended to foster, girls who drop out of school may not only face a fine, but also be left with the stigma of failure. Moreover, this one-sided way of assigning gendered responsibilities like pregnancies on to women and girls somewhat indirectly legitimizes the irresponsible

behavior of the men who abandon them with the sole responsibility of child-rearing.

Accordingly, though "doing gender" is conceptualized as sharing duties, also linked to

domestic chores, the unequal load of responsibility in terms of pregnancies and

parenthood seem to benefit men's individual freedom. Consequently, while men who fail

to "do gender" face less responsibility, the absence of "gender" penalizes women.

"There is No Gender in this Village"

The previous section noted the dos and don'ts of "gender." What, then, of the absence of

"gender"? All focus groups stated that there was "gender" in the villages; however, in

individual interviews, several women said there was "no gender" in their communities.

This absence was explained in terms of the gendered division of labor, and lack of mutual

respect and responsibility between the sexes in domestic work. As Elisa, a middle-aged

woman, put it:

> There is no gender in the village because there are specific jobs for women
>
> and for men.

When gender is perceived as something that one must "do" repeatedly in order to

maintain and regulate the balance between the sexes, it is not difficult to understand the

widely shared perception among participants that "gender" would disappear if they

"stopped doing it"—if they stopped sharing work and responsibilities, gender would also

stop. Naile explains:

> There is no gender in this community. If you get sick, it's usually your
>
> neighbor who takes care of you. The men just sleep—you can work
>
> together in the field, but when you come home they just look at you while

> you do the cooking. When a woman is sick, the men often run away, but if
>
> the husband is sick his wife is the one who takes care of him

Here, Naile relates an experience familiar to many women: even when they fall ill, their

husbands count on them to manage the household. She also notes the solidarity among

women, where neighboring women help out. Naile concludes that the existence of

"gender" cannot be justified by the presence of a few specific practices, such as allowing

women access to arenas earlier closed to them. If "gender" really existed, men would

help their wives with the cooking after working in the field together *and* would show

compassion when they are unwell.

Lindiwe, a newly divorced mother of three, says she did not "have gender" in her

marriage, and she sheds light on the patriarchal structure that constitutes life for many

Malawian women:

> Most of the men they just wake up and then sit down, without caring that
>
> maybe they have some kids, they just wake up and then maybe go to play
>
> Bao-game, and then come back without thinking of their responsibilities

Here, Lindiwe refers to how men do not feel responsibility for their children—a point

made by many female participants—and to the gendered inequity many women

experience as regards household work. "Bao" is a board game popular among both men

and women in East Africa; thus, the imbalance she describes is the equation of free time

versus responsibility and domestic work. Contradictory to the idea of "gender" as a

method that focuses solely on the inclusion of women, we found wide agreement among

participants that "gender" is connected to the inclusion or exclusion of women *and* men

in work, household, responsibilities, etc. However, there is some dissonance in how men and women perceive the private and the official "gender". Men talk of "gender" as a good that they themselves and the community as a whole benefit from, and they say they realize that they can "help" in the household if the woman is away or if she is ill. Women also talk of "gender" as something good: but they acknowledge the lack of "gender" in the private sphere. They agree that women are now allowed, even welcomed, to do "men's work," and that women's inclusion in labor reduces work hours and streamlines productivity—but women are still responsible for the major part of domestic work. More porous gender roles enable shared work outside the household, but do not seem to apply to domestic work. On the whole, then, "gender" appears to benefit men more than women. This is a highly relevant point, as global gender-equality policies and NGO gender-promoting programs are designed to foster women's participation by reducing gendered practices.

"Gender" and Witchcraft

In Malawi, as in many other African countries and cultures, many people believe in *Ufiti,* often translated as "witchcraft" (Holdstock, 2013; Leistner, 2014) or "sorcery" (Mbiti, 1990; Murrey, 2017). Witchcraft and "the sense of insecurity the term indicates permeates virtually every aspect of life" (Ashforth, 2018, p. 1). From birth to death, life is defined and confined by the permanent threat of spiritual insecurity, and the fear of witchcraft attacks compels people to take a whole range of precautions (Ashforth, 2005b). The Association for Secular Humanism, a Malawian NGO, defines witchcraft-related violence as "behavior that is intended to hurt or kill another person. Violence need not be physical. It may be economic, social, psychological or sexual" (Chilimampunga &

Thindwa, 2012, p. 8). Witchcraft has actual and critical consequences for people, and considerable time and effort go into circumventing witchcraft and protecting oneself (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011).

Several participants told us how traditional love potions and witchcraft explain why men do not help out with domestic chores. Many women regard the use of love potions as a justifiable way of getting their men to remain faithful and fulfill their role as fathers and husbands; men, however, often see this as a harmful act of witchcraft that violates their free will (Ashforth, 2018).

> *Kennedy:* Here, there is not gender like 100%. If people see a man doing
>
> the washing, they [neighbors] would think that maybe the woman used
>
> some magical charms to get him to do it. But if the woman is away, then
>
> he can do the washing, because they [neighbors]) would understand that
>
> his wife was not there.

> *Fredah:* Other people [neighbors] can think that maybe you've used some
>
> love potion, to get your own husband to help you in the house.

These excerpts refer to the use of traditional love potions, generally said to be used to manipulate people to get them to perform various acts. The reasoning is that men can do women's work under the influence of love medicines *or* if the woman is not around. The woman's role is to take care of the household; when a man takes part in daily housework, he is "helping out" or helping himself, rather than actually sharing the responsibility. There are many ways to protect oneself from witchcraft attacks, but there are also many ways in which this protection can be broken. Sylvia explains how daily practices can be apportioned between the sexes in order to avoid witchcraft:

> Only farming, they [men and women] could farm together—but washing
>
> and cooking, no, they [men] say that is why they married you, so that you
>
> can manage the home. And otherwise, people believe that a man should
>
> not touch a cooking stick, because that would stop any protection he might
>
> have against attack [witchcraft attack] (…) the cooking stick washes it
>
> away. Also if others [neighbors] see your husband doing that, they think
>
> that you have used traditional medicine to get him to do household chores.

Sylvia points to the "organization" of marriage, how men expect their wives to do the

household work. Further, she describes breaking gender norms as colliding and

conflicting with witchcraft. Many everyday practices are related to protection from

witchcraft attacks: where this belief is practiced, men are not supposed to do the cooking

because of the impending threat of witchcraft spells. That means that if a woman gets her

husband to help with cooking, she can be blamed for using love medicine on him, or for

trying to get him to ruin his protection against witchcraft.

Discussion

In their article on gender and development discourses in relation to food security in urban

Malawi, Riley and Dodson (2016) hold that discourses of "gender" illustrate how

interventions aimed at fostering gender equality are inescapably intertwined with

contextual knowledge. They maintain that the conception of "*gender,* including its spatial

connotations as something exogenous to Malawi and specifically associated with urban

life" (Riley & Dodson, 2016, p. 1057) derives from a mixture of colonial/ postcolonial

gender constructions, and today's global discourses of gender equality and human rights.

Similar to our study, Riley and Dodson's participants report "gender" as being a new

phenomenon that has come from the outside. For the majority, it brings positive social change, where the rigid divisions between male and female duties and daily activities are relaxed somewhat. However, while men speak positively about greater gender egalitarianism in the public sphere, women note the reversion to traditional gender roles in the private sphere. Interestingly, Riley and Dodson's urban participants mention that lack of education and backwardness in rural villages might result in suspicions of men who perform female duties because of "love medicines."

Although the findings of our study share similarities with Riley and Dodson's urban research, the main differences remain important. Among their participants there was broad consensus on "gender" as a progressive civilized urban phenomenon linked to educational level, and thus assumed to be less prevalent in rural societies. However, the participants in our rural study report "doing gender" as part of everyday village life. Thus, it would appear, the meaning-making of gendered life is—if not directly, at least indirectly and abstractly—constitutive of people's lives, also in rural Malawi.

For reporting on the occurrence and extent of "gender equality," "gender accounting" (Classen, 2013, p. 226) is an effective measure that reduces the complexity of "gender equality" to an individual level that is countable and reportable (see also Shore & Wright, 2015). This method quantifies by simplifying "gender parameters" in a way that disregards the circumstantially defined strategies that men and women use to navigate in a fundamentally unequal society. Such context-specific and often creative approaches to "gender inequality" are therefore missed because of ignorance or lack of contextual understanding (Classen, 2013). Data from our fieldwork support this insight: our analysis shows how "gender" is variously constructed to fit the context of these rural villages.

The rural Malawian practice of "gender" is positioned in the midst of a complex and dynamic process highly imbricated in historical, geographical, cultural, economic and ideological contexts where global, societal and individual development is central. The complex characteristics of "gender" make interpretation and understanding of the concept circumstantial, creative, and sometimes contradictory, as seen in the various interviews and focus groups. In many ways the local use of "gender" exceeds the narrow account practiced by the state and NGOs operating in the villages.

Drawing on Haslam's (2016) theoretical account and our own analysis, we argue that the academic concept of "gender" has undergone "concept creep." Within the interrelationship of psychology, development theory and practice, and societal change, "gender" has expanded, vertically and horizontally, into new contexts, with looping effects on how individuals in rural Malawian villages "make sense of themselves personally and collectively" (Haslam, 2016, p. 2). Further, with regard to Haslam's (2016) framework, we contend that, even though "gender" per se is not seen as a particularly negative concept, this "concept creep" may indicate how and why the alteration of "gender" may entail negative effects.

Referring to the human rights movements that target inequality as regards women and minorities, Haslam (2016) maintains that "concept creep" may be connected to broader cultural and societal shifts. Our study participants in rural Malawi note that "gender" came to their villages not long ago. This leads back to global development changes in general, and societal changes in Malawi more specifically. During Kamuzu Banda's more than 30 years of one-party rule, foreign organizations were basically not allowed to operate within the country. It was only with the end of his dictatorship in 1994 that

Malawi opened its borders to international organizations (Thornton, Pierotti, Young-DeMarco, & Watkins, 2014), mainly for assistance with the rampant HIV epidemic; the number of operating NGOs has grown since then (Morfit, 2011). In Malawi's new democratic constitution, social, cultural, and economic rights were included under the "right to development"; and the right to "gender equality" was declared an explicit principle, recognized in several international treaties (Riley & Dodson, 2016). This was probably also a result of the 1990s mainstreaming of the "gender and development" movement where global development policy and practice promoted "gender equality" as the new paradigm (Hickel, 2014). "Gender" came to Malawi and these villages due to societal changes; and, as the concept trickled down from the global to the national and local levels, its meaning changed—now referring both to the legal right to "gender equality," and to social ideas of how men and women could benefit by practicing it.

The most prominent conceptual change of "gender" has been *horizontal*. While "gender" has kept its original academic definition, the concept has spread horizontally from the psychological definition concerning gendered individuals, to the focus in development theory and policy on women's inclusion, and to the Chichewan concept of "not differentiating between men and women at work," referring to a specific "doing" in a specific place.

"Gender" as promoted by foreign and national NGOs in Malawi has been applied in a new context, as confirmed by our participants. They experience "gender" as a new way of living that has come mainly through the arrival of NGOs, and from people who are different from them. "Gender" is seen as something that enables men and women to share work and responsibility, and which pays off in collective goods like time-efficiency and

saving money. With this qualitative stretch, "gender" has come to be associated with normative concepts such as "moral," "responsibility," and "agency," in turn connoting to managerial concepts of "time," "money," "efficiency," and the like. We find that "gender" is regarded as a perspective, principle, practice, a way of living—not as an inherent, dichotomous human category. Unlike the original psychological concept, "gender" is here intuitively understood as a *collective incentive*.

The individualistic–collectivistic contrast is also evident in the *vertical* extension. Most of our study participants were positive to "gender" and its "effects." Men generally appreciated the time-efficiency aspect, as did women, who also valued their newfound agency. However, the instrumental ways in which NGOs teach "gender" sometimes create ambiguous understandings, leading to contradictory consequences. In the villages, it is commonly said that "gender" now allows women into areas of work previously restricted to men—but women still bear the burden of most household work. With the inclusion of women, "gender" streamlines work previously done exclusively by men, leaving women with more work-time, and men with less. This is not specific to rural Malawi: around the world, most of the unpaid labor is still done by women, reflecting both what is defined as "work" and their inferior social position. That is indeed the opposite of what NGOs argue they intend to achieve by promoting "gender equality." Further, unlike development theory and practice, where "gender" is seen as closely related to the mainstreaming of "gender equality" and the inclusion of women, our rural Malawian participants understand "gender" as involving *both* sexes. When "gender" is regarded as a means to reach a common goal, the exclusion of either sex may be perceived as "no gender." The one-sided NGO focus on women may, instead of

promoting "gender equality," lead to *not* practicing "gender," as seen by the local population. "Not doing gender" is connected to irresponsible and selfish behavior, as generally stated by female participants with reference to men. This way of understanding "gender" extends the NGOs' narrow implementation of it, with new approaches to what men and women can do and expect from each other and from society. In FGDs in our study, both men and women expressed notions of gender egalitarianism, but privately women stressed continued adherence to traditional gender roles. This might be explained by the wish to provide socially acceptable answers in line with development discourses. Also, as indicated in the analysis, *not* "doing gender" is regarded as egoistic, in turn making it difficult to accuse others openly of this. We see this as an example of *vertical* expansion, where NGO interventions result in indefinite and less stringent perceptions of what "gender" may and may not represent.

With the global policy pressure from world organizations and donors, NGOs commit to achieve "gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls." This pressure is reproduced and emplaced on individual women and especially on girls, and not getting pregnant, graduating from school and escaping from structural poverty become increasingly important. The individual behavior and agency of girls becomes a common interest. The heavy focus on school attendance is further extended on the local level, where participants report that girls who drop out of school must pay a fine to the local police, signalizing their sole responsibility for such "misconduct." However, in a society where poverty is prevalent, with inefficient infrastructure and little access to electricity and other amenities, dropping out of school is often not a choice but a consequence of cultural, social and economic problems. Girls who drop out "fail" to meet certain

standards. Contradictory to "gender equality," these girls now face increased inequity, associated with their own individual behavior. Additionally, while the one-sided focus on girls' reproductive behavior implicitly furthers the idea of pregnancy as girls' responsibility, the bias in a way simultaneously sanctions men who do not "do gender" by deserting their responsibility as fathers. Consequently, the individual focus on "gender" may indirectly justify male independence while assigning even more expectations and responsibility to women and girls already struggling to cope in a society permeated with inequity. The "doing" of "gender" also conflicts with cultural beliefs in witchcraft and traditional love medicine. As these components permeate almost every aspect of Malawian life, and as "gender" is connected to everyday life practices, "gender" will inevitably come into conflict with witchcraft and protection against witchcraft. Thus, "doing gender" is not only manifested in the mundane "doings" of ordinary life: it may also shed light on gendered differences connected to the supernatural aspects of life. Although the prevalence of witchcraft in Malawi and its harmful consequences have been thoroughly documented by many social anthropologists (see Ashforth, 2018; Englund, 2007), the village chief reported that none of the NGOs active in the communities we studied acknowledged witchcraft or tried to deal with it. Thus, in ignoring the well-documented fact that witchcraft is especially harmful for women and children (Mgbako & Glenn, 2011; Reis, 2013) these NGOs show their ignorance of local and contextual inequalities that further subordinate women and children.

According to Haslam (2016), the popularity of a concept may help to explain why it gains impact force, creeps, and conquers new semantic fields. Concepts that appeal particularly to researchers and practitioners have a greater chance of getting spread in

new forms and contexts. Thus, the influence of psychology on adjacent disciplines and institutional practices may account for why "gender," paired with positively laden concepts like "empowerment," "agency," and "equality," has expanded rather than contracted. Further, definitions of concepts that describe humans and human activity are bound to be in constant change (Haslam, 2016). "Gender," which is applicable to all humans in one way or another, may well be one of the most adopted, least stable, and most shifting concepts in operation. The wide range of scientific disciplines, international organs and development agencies that are involved in human activity, apply a range of interpretations of "gender" and "gendered attributes" into an infinite variety of places and spaces.

As researchers from Norway, one of the world's most gender-equal societies, we find it imperative to reflect upon our own positionality when engaging in settings where structural inequality permeates all aspects of life. These fundamentally diverse backgrounds and experiences pose limitations on *what* and *how* we can attempt to understand about life in rural Malawi in general and gendered life in particular. Despite the risk of adopting a Western interpretative prerogative, we hope to be able to shed light on some of the issues that emerge when we talk of "others" and how the "others" may reflect our own taken-for-granted assumptions. This study has neither intended nor claimed to show how manhood and womanhood are understood in rural Malawi today: rather, we have sought to explain some of the contextual and non-universal characteristics of the "universal" concept of gender. Further ethnographical studies would enable a deeper description, fostering an understanding of the various ways in which "gender" is negotiated, and how individuals actually act in relation to gender.

Conclusions

Our analysis has shown how the idea of "gender" as collectively regulated in shared work and participation is far broader than the individual concept spread by Western psychology. These portrayed constructions of "gender" and the account of "concept creep" regarding gender have relevance for the wider gender discourse beyond rural Malawi. Our participants' ideas of "gender" show how something generally defined as inherent, individual, and universal may experience concept creep, shifting its meaning to refer to a method involving cooperation that in turn results in collective goods. In the Chichewa language, "gender" is in itself a collective idea, referring to shared work and responsibility. However, in Malawi, as throughout the world, women's access to traditionally male-dominated spheres of the world does not seem to lift the load of unpaid labor from their shoulders. Indeed, with gender-equality interventions centered on individual girls and women, the focus may entail backlash, with these girls and women being held responsible and accountable for their own education and reproductive behavior. Although "gender" has brought some positive changes to these communities, implementation has also had potentially negative implications for women—and that merits further investigation. Psychology and development policy and practice should critically review their inter-connectedness, acknowledging the non-universal and contextual characteristics of life in society.

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