Experiential and emotional encounters of women planners in Africa

Olusola Olufemi

Women planners in Africa do not constitute a critical mass: their numbers remain negligible and their output unrecognised, while mentors and role models still tend to be male. Women’s experiences are undervalued, and their knowledge is often excluded in policy, project planning, and implementation. This article arises not from systematic academic research but from confessional, reflective, pilot research based on personal experience and the experiences reported by 25 women planners between 1999 and 2004. It deliberately seeks to break the monotony of drawing from survey results which are often detached from experiential and emotional encounters. Using anecdotal material from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, it examines the training and professional environment of the ‘planneress’; and discusses the emotions, expectations, and experiences of female planners in everyday encounters.

KEY WORDS: Gender and Diversity; Sub-Saharan Africa

The planneress

The everyday reality of the planneress¹ is (mis)informed and shaped by the ethically and politically (in)correct behaviour and attitudes of the men with whom they interact and work. In sub-Saharan Africa, women’s knowledge and experience have been sidelined and regarded as unequal to men’s within the planning² profession. Female subservience and patriarchy continue unchecked in the daily encounters of women planners. Male planners dominate the planning profession, and the planneress is portrayed either as a marginal man or a macho woman.³ The lack of pressure from women planners and the lack of guidance from the profession itself conspire to exclude and render the planneress invisible, which undermines women’s morale and self-esteem.

Women’s lives are informed and shaped by the politics of power relations. Thus, the personal becomes political because women planners have to deal with the inequity, discrimination, marginalisation, and exploitation that are entrenched in the various patriarchal institutions in the public realm, and are reflected in the personal experiences of women training to become planners and in their professional environment.
Enrolment and training

African societies tend to place a profound emphasis on women’s reproductive role, and hence there are high expectations of their role as wives and mothers, and as carers and nurturers within the household. These roles are also central to a woman’s identity, but arguably relegate educating a woman or girl to a secondary priority or even a privilege. From personal experience:

*Training to become a planner in Nigeria was very challenging in a culture where women are seen to belong to the domestic/private sphere and aspiring to do a master’s degree is perceived to be pushing your luck. In my postgraduate programme there were four females and 14 males in a class of 18. Two of the females in the class were already working in Town Planning Offices. The two-year master’s programme seems too long on the part of the students, considering the financial implications and the pressure on the women to start a family (the ultimate expectation of any woman born into the traditional African society).* (Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are taken from pilot research conducted between 1999 and 2004.)

Equal opportunities seldom come into play in the enrolment of female students in African schools of planning. For example, in the case of the Ibadan Polytechnic one study (Olurin 1992) indicates that out of about 270 planning students, only 38 (14 per cent) were women. In South Africa, by contrast, there tends to be a higher percentage of women planning students, and gender shifts are more notable in the composition of the student population. Badenhorst (1994) noted that in 1994 49 per cent of planning students in South Africa were female, compared with 31 per cent in 1977. Table 1 indicates that in 1991 there were 55 female planning graduates, a figure that rose to 73 in 1998; while Table 2 shows a significant percentage of female planning students.

In other African countries this might be different. Female enrolment in undergraduate programmes is about 51 per cent, declining to 41 per cent in postgraduate programmes. There are far fewer women enrolled in the Technikons (18 per cent), compared with the universities. Overall the female student enrolment for 2003 in all accredited university programmes is about 46 per cent.

Whether in planning practice, academic institutions, or the professional planning associations, men outnumber women significantly. Gender inequality means that women have to walk the extra mile to prove themselves, as seen from the excerpts below:

‘I found myself the only woman among men and it was not easy because I had to prove myself ten times more.’ (Female planner in the entertainment industry, 2001)

‘Since I graduated and started working as a planner, I have always been in the world of men. Even at the University, there were just two women in a class of 22. Also working as a lecturer in the planning department there were very few women.’ (Female planning lecturer, 2001, 2002)

Male instructors outnumber the females in these planning institutions and they ‘could be supportive and sympathetic on the one hand or, cynical, intimidating and arrogant on the other hand’ (female planner in a planning and research organisation, 2001).

The curricula in most African Schools of Planning rarely emphasise gender/gender-planning issues and tend to exclude women’s knowledge and experience. For example, gender issues are seldom mentioned in Planning Theory, Law and Administration, and Planning Practice. It is therefore questionable whether the proportion of women planning graduates has any impact on the marginalisation or absence of women/gender issues in curriculum development,
Table 1: HSRC university graduate database: national qualification trends for Town and Regional Planning, South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Bachelor</th>
<th>PG Diploma</th>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Colored/Asian</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

although the exclusion of gender issues affects the whole way in which planning is conceptu-
alised and executed.

Progress towards gender equality in planning education is dependent on the success in tack-
ling inequalities in wider aspects of economic, political, social, and cultural life, especially in
the context of sub-Saharan Africa. The achievement of the third Millennium Development
Goal, which emphasises the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women,
is contingent on these factors.

Environment of planning

Women planners are still located at the periphery, whether in the planning office or agency or in the
field. At meetings or during fieldwork, women planners constantly face comments such as: ‘‘She is
a woman’’ (meaning she can’t do any better, she can be undermined and she is supposed to be voi-
celless)’ (female planner/lecturer, 2001). With regards to employment, most women planners work
with government agencies, particularly in local government (local planning authority, city or
municipal council). A few work in estate divisions, private consulting firms, and the transport
sector. Very few women teach at the technical colleges or polytechnics. In Nigeria, for instance,
there are more women employed in the local planning authorities and government ministries
than in universities, property development corporations, and consulting. Women tend to work
as town-planning officers, administrators, and in development control and social planning matters.

There are a handful of women who have become presidents of planning associations or chief
government planners in sub-Saharan Africa, but these are the exception who prove the rule.
Women are active in the local chapters either as treasurers, because they are often perceived
to be financially prudent, or as secretaries. About 5 per cent, 11 per cent, and 27 per cent of
women planners are respectively registered members3 of the Nigerian Institute of Town Plan-
ers, the Uganda Institute of Physical Planners, and the Zimbabwe Institute of Regional and
Urban Planners. About 24 per cent of the members of the South African Council for Planners
are women (see Table 3). The Kenya Planning Institute, launched in 2001, has 35 per cent
female membership. Kenya Institute of Planning is actively trying to reduce gender inequality
in the profession by increasing the participation of women in planning activities, including
women as elected officials in the institute, and promoting women to enrol in universities offering
planning courses.

Table 2: Gender profile of planning students in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Percentage female (of sample)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NDip and BTech at ML Sultan Technikon</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (TRP), Wits University</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc (TRP), University of Pretoria</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTRP, University of Natal</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSc (Development Planning), Wits University</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s in Environment and Development, Natal (Pietermaritzburg campus)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate environment programmes, Natal (Durban)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s in Development Studies, Natal (Durban)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s in Public Administration at University of Durban Westville</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From personal experience and observation:

Women are expected to add the feminine touch in the meetings or gatherings either by taking notes or serving tea; there is silence when you contribute in meetings (consensual or non-consensual, not sure); no response so you are not even sure if your contribution is meaningful or not.

Women planners sometimes are faced with situations of submissiveness, discrimination, sexual harassment, and godfatherism. Inequality often takes repressive and sometimes oppressive forms, as revealed in my conversations with women planners:

Men think you are fragile and cannot survive without a godfather in the profession. (Woman planner in the public sector, 2001)

 Older male colleagues think you don’t matter or you can be manipulated for various purposes or they are doing you a favour by including you in projects. (Woman planner in a research organisation, 2002)

Women planners are constantly under pressure both from their male classmates, male instructors and male workers in positions of power who demand sexual gratification. (Personal experience)

You get used to non-verbal cues, less pay, non-gratification or exploited for work done because you are a female, and your age (young, compared with the male colleagues) is also a barrier. (Woman planner in the public sector, 2001)

Qualified women planners have also diversified into non-planning careers in response to pressure, sexual harassment, and oppression by some male colleagues. Sexism and male chauvinism are based on male gender identity and men’s power to control and dominate through sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and/or sexual bribery. Some women planners end up in fashion designing, hairdressing, commerce, gas-station businesses, or as contractors. A few of the women planners (about 15 per cent) attribute such diversification to difficulty in applying what they have been taught, the fact that planning is not sufficiently lucrative, and inability to make headway with their often inflexible male colleagues. Some of the women have additional sources of income aside from being practising planners;

I own two gas stations and a gift shop. It is better than being harassed by my male colleagues. (Female planner in the business sector, 1999)

Table 3: Registered female planners in selected sub-Saharan African countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of registered planners</th>
<th>No. of female registered planners</th>
<th>% of registered female planners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Communication with chairmen and members of the various planning associations in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Uganda between 2003 and 2005.
These days I can breathe easier because I am my own boss, I have my own business. I used to be discriminated against by my male colleagues. When it comes to assigning tasks, they always indicate that I stay behind in the office to overlook things while they go out to the field. (Female planner working as a fashion designer, 2000)

I had to resign my job from a planning firm because of constant demand for sexual favours. (Female planner with a home-based enterprise not related to planning, 2003)

These issues are seldom openly raised in a professional setting, because ‘If you raise the inherent bias by male colleagues and the perception by women planners nothing would be done about them’ (female planner now working as a private consultant, 2004); and ‘they would tell you there are more important issues to focus on rather than what the women are doing’ (non-practising female planner, 2004).

While by no means all male planners exhibit such attitudes, these experiential narratives could work either for or against women planners in the African context, where women’s contributions are either omitted or mentioned cursorily in land-use and development-planning processes.

Is the planneress’s cup half full or half empty?

The everyday reality of the planneress remains critical in determining whether her cup is half full or half empty. The deeply entrenched gender division of labour and male domination mean that the number of women planners is still negligible, considering the impact of planning on women’s lives, and the enormous challenges posed to planners by human settlements in many African countries. Women who challenge patriarchal power still meet with subtle resistance. Women who have raised their voices against male domination and control have sometimes been reprimanded, frowned upon, and perceived as betraying (inflexible) traditional African values and expectations.

African female planners are yet to constitute the critical mass necessary to have an effect on professional planning content and practice. The planneress is located on the periphery of planning and still faces day-to-day discrimination and stereotyping in the planning agencies and institutions. Howatt et al. (2004) affirm that although it may have declined, overt discrimination has become subtler, meaning that women find it difficult to participate in the governance of the institution in which they are based, and overall constitute only a small percentage. The planneress is thus caught between meeting professional demands and social expectations, facing the triple dilemma of wanting to be respected professionally by her male colleagues, wanting to be recognised as an achiever in her profession, while at the same time fulfilling her domestic roles.

It is gratifying to note that the March 2005 ten-year review of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), as well as the Beijing +10, continued to endorse the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality. In addition, the Commonwealth Secretariat plan of action (PoA) complements and reinforces the Millennium Development Goals and UN resolutions by focusing on gender, poverty eradication, and economic empowerment. These goals and resolutions cannot be achieved if women are not emancipated from poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchy.

Press, push, and pursue

There are no easy solutions to gender inequalities or the under-representation of women planners. Although women planners have suffered historical inequality and negligibility, they have become empowered through their contributions in the areas of community work, advocacy, social reform, feminist practices in planning, and equity issues. The image of the planneress
has changed and is still changing. Not only are female planners mothers and wives; they are also involved in shaping and reshaping society’s socio-spatial spheres. The contribution of women planners in Australia, North America, and the UK, and to some extent in South Africa, is phenomenal. In the rest of Africa their contribution has gone unrecognised, or is given only limited recognition, and women are still supposed to be seen and not heard, or heard and not listened to. This is corroborated by the fact that the image of the woman is still envisaged to be within the traditional gender-ascribed role of domestic executives.

Women planners have the knowledge, skills, and potential to participate in policy decisions and project implementation. Planning needs to be re-invented in most sub-Saharan African countries to include women. The planneress needs to press, push, and pursue change through measures such as the following:

- Collaboration with women in planning networks, and in women’s own networks, such as the London Women in Planning Forum or the Women in Planning Network of the Commonwealth Association of Planners (WiP CAP).
- Representation of women planners in all planning, decision making, project implementation, and policy at all levels.
- Education and awareness through marketing and mentorship programmes. Catch them while still young by marketing the profession to attract young women into training.

The ‘press, push, and pursue’ strategy hinges on the women’s Collective efforts, Cooperation, Commitment, Conversation, and Communication. Sharing women’s knowledge through communication will help to re-invent planning to include women. Sandercock and Forsyth (1990: 73) note that ‘the construction of knowledge involves communication, politics and passion’. The knowledge and active involvement of women planners in networking and building intellectual relationships is pivotal to achieving more effective outcomes. Women in the planning profession should continue to use their knowledge, intuition, experience, and positive values to influence the content and context of planning; and to address gender inequality and their marginal position in the profession. The reinvention of planning in rural and urban sub-Saharan Africa entails crossing gender boundaries through individual and collective action that is channelled through networks and exchanges, dialogue and communication, with vigour and passion.

Notes

2. ‘Planning’ refers to Urban and Regional Planning or Town and Country Planning.
3. ‘Macho’ in this sense refers to a woman in a man’s world; a woman trying to work and excel in a traditionally perceived male profession.
4. In most of the African countries data are not available. Record keeping is poor, and it is therefore difficult or impossible to find statistically relevant information.
5. Not all planners in the African planning profession are registered with their various institutes or planning councils.

References


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Millennium Development Goals: www.developmentgoals.org


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