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Book Review: Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal: The Extent of Empowerment

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**Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal: The Extent of Empowerment. 2011.
Catherine Ndinda. Saarbrücken: Lambert Publishing; 408 pages. Paperback (\$112.00).
ISBN-10: 3844387870.**

Reviewed by Mvuseleo T.M. Mgeyane¹

As Africans we have no option but to accept that research for us, first and foremost, is about formulating theoretical codes that should guide us in producing working solutions for nation building with African solutions and suited for Africa. Having read other works by Ndinda, I have no doubt that this author cherishes this view. In *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal: The extent of Empowerment*, the author does the same—demonstrating the inadequacy and incompleteness of some of the theories in African development, particularly the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) housing context. This allowed the author to draw conclusions that reflect her view of the shortfall of the theories in the value chain that delivers housing.

The theoretical and conceptual framework addresses development theories such as the modernist theory. The modernist perspective in assuming that all that was traditional was deficient and all that was Western was good posed problems when applied in the context of South Africa. While in Europe this notion was a mantra to nudge everyone into almost blind acceptance that the only way to the future from feudalism was capitalism, in South Africa modernism was a double edged sword. It was designed to marshal everyone to the European mode of living and the reprogramming of Africans into European cultures. In material terms it went hand in hand with land dispossession and generally racialized distribution of wealth in favour of the white population. *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal* delves into the evidence provided by South African history pointing to the reluctance of modernisation of Africans in the context of women and housing. According to Ndinda, (p7) “...no formal accommodation was made available for women in the cities...” measures were enacted to “restrict the urbanisation of African women”. This dislocated African families—the effect of which would be felt long after the end of apartheid.

Apartheid was partly a design to modernise Africans just sufficiently for the needs of the then established system of production and nationhood. Also there is evidence to show that Africans held onto their own as opposed to readily accepting foreign ways. Therefore at hand, South Africa developed, as it still does, a euro-styled modernisation while African traditional ways continued to evolve particularly stimulated also by political resistance. The interfacing of these two worlds is a subject of curiosity and enquiry for the author demonstrating how in the negotiation of the two, the outcome of inequality was perpetuated against women pre-1994 and how it changed post 1994. Using “participation” as the departure point to unearth inequality, *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal* postulates the view point that “...to understand the level of women’s involvement, participation has to move beyond the project notion to a multi-relational perspective that examines women’s role both at the project level as well as well as in the linkages related to shelter” (p10) The implications of this view are enormous in that they see participation as a contributor in institutional capacitation not only for

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housing itself but also for downstream opportunities and challenges that are an integral part of human settlements.

The apartheid era, as Ndinda demonstrates, ushered a systematic destruction of African cultures, organisation, and institutions. This is clear from the elaborate legal norms and administrative systems that were created for the purpose. The Group Areas Act which separated Africans² according to tribal lines and Blacks³ in general away from whites created boundaries thus limiting possibilities of the fusion of cultures, which otherwise would have happened naturally if there was no purposeful separation. Entrepreneurship of Africans, in particular was put under the microscope, to keep their economic competition under check. In the context of South Africa urbanisation of Africans was a reluctant endeavour pursued just to accommodate and prepare the bare minimum labour required for the country's industrial development. The reluctance with which urbanisation of Africans was executed by the pre '94 government was demonstrated by containment of Africans in rural settlements and creation of the state of temporality for those that already lived in urban areas. *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal* captures this elaborately.

The author (Ndinda) ponders over the most appropriate question in the immediate post-apartheid period – which by virtue of it being on the face of the public, tends to play a public relations function for a government. During the days of resistance to the racist apartheid government, housing was easily used to muzzle the system and turn the tables on it. The effect of housing along racist lines; discriminatory to women; in keeping with limiting African population from accessing land; and bent on turning South Africa into a European enclave, could not be hidden. The effects were made visible by the settlement patterns. The author demonstrates this. But the importance of the question resides in the fact that even in post '94 the issue of housing, in general, continues to be the face of the current government although the pertinent issues of concern from the public's point of view are now different. Going under the name of 'service delivery', the critics question 'houselessness' and shoddy workmanship in the case of those houses already built. These are new areas of enquiry that should be interrogated as the story of housing evolves.

Ndinda brings a methodical approach to the question of women and subsidised housing. The gender angle to the problem of housing allows resource allocation to target the neediest. Yet more work could be done to further dissect African women to arrive at clear group differentiation as their statuses are not the same. In *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal* empowerment is theorised from the point of view of end user – the women. From the process point of view, the author keeps in sight, distribution of housing, by which count can be taken to measure success or failure of housing programmes. Empowerment is further unpacked into the 'levels of participation'. Here Ndinda traces women in different stages of participation that follow a process flow. In articulating the 'levels' of participation the author identifies planning, design and implementation – suggesting the Value Chain approach.

On another level, in pursuit of the gender approach to the problem, the author brings in narrative that delves into a problem not yet explored in the context of South Africa – *the control of African population growth*. This is more urgent to examine as some of its effects are showing now and will take long to change yet they are affecting the future of inheritance of SA which was always at the heart of the vision of the apartheid state. "*Colonialism of a special type*" current in South Africa at the time was preoccupied with who would inherit the country. Obsession with

² The term here and in the text is used to refer to indigenous Africans

³ Term is used to refer to non-whites (Africans, Coloureds and Indians)

the illusive “swart gevaar” was a central dogma of apartheid propaganda to galvanise support for the system by the general white population. Multiple state sponsored initiatives were undertaken. This agenda paralysed the fabric that had ensured self-reproduction of the African society. Families were dislocated. Male absenteeism from African households became normal. While men were away women did not acquire the leadership status in their families thus creating an abysmal vacuum. The knowledge of agriculture died. While some of these are features of a purely capitalist society they benefitted the system under construction at the time. The extent of interference with logic of development of South African statehood ensured that even when the “*colonialism of a special type*” was gone, somehow, it would attain new sponsors who would drive it, sometimes, unwittingly. This agenda paralysed the fabric that had ensured self reproduction of African society.

Ndinda reminds us how domiciliary rights, for women, were acquired through marriage thus excluding divorced and single women from urban housing. She also explores the extent to which men were used, subtly, as an extension of the system to control the flow of women to urban areas. The laws placed them as ‘authority’ to allow or disallow women’s stay or visit to the urban areas. Such laws promoted oppression of women by men on the one hand. On the other hand they artificially created a diabolic balance of women to men ratio that would break the backbone of African/Zulu culture on families.

In the case studies examined, Ndinda notes that for women who held leadership positions in leadership structures, progression to the top positions was impeded significantly. The decision-making positions of Chairperson were not held by women, but rather by men a factor she traces to the general “Zulu gendered cultural practices as well as the division of labour in the public and private spheres” (P356). High levels of women’s participation in some of the cases studied (two out of five areas) led to additional services in health and safety. In three out of five cases studied women used their own resources to manufacture block for construction with no cash benefit due to competition posed by the suppliers chosen by the local authorities.

The recommendations suggested, make inroads into tackling weaknesses littered in the value chain that delivers housing in KZN. The recommendations made in *Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal: The extent of Empowerment*, resonate with the principle of integrated development planning. This principle is further expanded by her attitude that housing is more than a shelter but also about what happens during settlement. To this end she brings her critical view of local authorities where she demonstrates how local authorities undermine the spirit of the new government in promoting small business, by not granting opportunities to women suppliers of requisite building material. This area needs further exploration to examine its various causes as it runs contrary to ambition to build a vibrant small business sector through local entrepreneurship.

Ndinda cogently argues that women’s participation should be conceived as an activity that goes beyond provision of a house to encompass infrastructure development as well. She isolates home-based businesses of women as an area for further research to explore the potential for their contribution in enhancing human settlement. The validity of this point is accentuated by permanence of unemployment, particularly of young people including women and the topicality of the issue and the fact that a government’s approach to unemployment is the indicator of its commitment to development- and should be seen as one with housing. Ndinda argues that skills attained during construction were also useful for sustenance of the community in other aspects of community development. However she still views access to credit facilities as impediments. The author cautions that local authorities may deviate from stipulated policy. To this end she

recommends adherence to the principles of "...integrated development planning ...in establishment of settlements...".

Women and Subsidised Housing in KwaZulu-Natal: The Extent of Empowerment is a valuable text for scholars interested in gender and housing post-apartheid South Africa. The valid and credible sources and the empirical data used contribute to the robustness of the argument that the author makes about women's participation in subsidised housing delivery. The gendered approach to exploring subsidised housing in South Africa makes it a useful text for scholars in the disciplines of gender studies, urban sociology and housing studies.

References

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