

UCLA

CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Visiting Rwanda to Discuss Gender Equity in Education: Q&A with Kathleen McHugh

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2dk993q4>

Author

Sher, Ben Raphael

Publication Date

2014

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Visiting Rwanda to Discuss Gender Equity in Education

*Q &A with
Kathleen McHugh*

BY BEN RAPHAËL SHER



LASTYEAR, the Women's Leadership Program, funded by USAID and managed by Higher Education for Development, awarded the UCLA African Studies Center and the University of Rwanda, College of Education, a million-dollar partnership grant on "Promoting Gender Equity and Female Empowerment." The partnership is intended to increase Rwandan women's participation in the teaching profession and create curricula and pedagogical strategies sensitive to gender issues and the need to empower women students. CSW Director Kathleen McHugh is part of the partnership committee and recently traveled to Rwanda, along with CSW Research Scholar Kathie Sheldon and several faculty members associated with the African Studies Center (see photo opposite). They engaged with University of Rwanda students and faculty about various topics related to gender and education. CSW Update sat down with McHugh to learn more about her trip.

Why is this partnership important, both for UCLA and for University of Rwanda?

I think this project is very important for both UCLA and the University of Rwanda because issues concerning gender equity, gender-based violence, and equal opportunity in education and work are problems in both countries. The two countries have complementary strengths. While the US is certainly ahead of Rwanda in terms of cultural attitudes concerning gender equity, Rwanda leads the world in terms of gender equity

in legislative government. They are number 1 in the world and the U.S. is 80th. So, considering each national context, there's a dialogism represented by these two institutions, both of which are committed to attaining gender equity in education and employment opportunities, social and cultural opportunities, and overall climate for men and women. Advantages or accomplishments in one context can inform the other.

As part of the Millennium Development Goals, the U.N. included the goal of achieving gender equity in elementary and secondary schools throughout the world by 2016. Rwanda probably won't make that deadline, but the government and the educational institutions there are very committed to getting as close as possible to realizing it.

Gender non-equity in education is an issue in Africa, mostly because of poverty. If a family only has enough money to educate one of their children, they're going to educate a boy, not a girl. The lack of institutional amenities also interrupts girls' education. Many schools do not have sufficient facilities for adolescent girls' hygiene. There are key issues, particularly in the rural areas of Rwanda, that have to do with poverty. Those are big and significant issues, and ones that this project is certainly not equipped to address.

What emerged from the visit, however, was that at the same time that Rwanda is very progressive in terms of government policies to ensure gender equity in the public sphere, there's a real cultural emphasis on traditional ideas of

gender, male privilege, and what it is to be masculine in Rwanda, that really challenge the goal of gender equity. As Professor Jolly Rubagiza in the Center for Gender, Culture, and Development said to me, "In Rwanda, masculinity means to not be accountable. To not have to be accountable to anyone." Femininity, then, means to be accountable: To men, to family, to traditions that dictate, for example, that a woman needs to be home when her husband gets home. This culture is very patriarchal and very religious. These cultural frameworks aren't predicated on gender equity.

As a result, there are real disparities between attitudes: What women are learning, what girls are learning in their families, what boys are learning in their families versus what they learn in school and in the public sphere about gender equity. That's where this project really makes a difference vis-à-vis Rwanda. The project helps its participants to address problematic cultural attitudes and to start to change those attitudes in the classroom. The University of Rwanda's School of Education, our primary host, trains elementary and secondary school teachers, and so those were the people that we were talking to, these teachers.

What was your role during the event?

I participated in four formal events, including two workshops. I was part of the gender awareness team. The gender awareness team included myself; Dr. Kathleen Sheldon, a CSW research scholar who specializes

in African women's history; Françoise Lionnet, Director of the African Studies Center at UCLA and the Principal Investigator of the project; and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology at UCLA. One workshop was on gender awareness in education and the other was on gender awareness in research. The workshops addressed: "How do you bring gender awareness into research and teaching?" For each, I gave a presentation, Kathie Sheldon gave a presentation, and then we did a Q & A together. We coordinated our lectures ahead of time. We had audiences of about 100 for the education workshop and 60 to 70 for the research workshop. I also participated in two smaller meetings with our corollary, the Center for Gender, Culture, and Development, in which we discussed the project, the goals, and how we could best work together.

Could you tell us more about your presentations?

The overall framework of the presentations emphasized that both universities are committed to global gender equity and that there are issues and problems that remain to establishing it. Those problems include the failure to raise the gender question and the failure to understand women's roles in history.

In discussing bringing gender awareness into research, my primary goal was to talk about the fact that if you don't ask the gender question in any research framework, in many instances you will produce research

that's distorted or flawed. I gave examples from cardiology, history, and media studies to make the point that when you don't ask about gender, you can produce incomplete or, in the case of medical research, dangerously misleading results. In history, the question, Where are the women?, has been tremendously generative. Asking that question has resulted in the historical record being completely transformed, both in content and in method.

Kathie Sheldon talked about the kinds of evidence used to document women in Rwandan history— from archaeology up to anthropology— and where that evidence is found.

The Q&A sessions were fascinating and productive, and immediately raised salient issues. One of the first questions came from an elementary school teacher who said, "Our students are believers. They are believers, they're very religious, and the Bible says that the man is the head of the household. How do you handle that in the classroom?" I talked about the fact that at UCLA we have evangelical Christians in our classrooms, we have people who have varying religious beliefs that necessitate that they not be in class on certain days. They raise issues in the classroom, if we're dealing with cultural representations of broad spectrums of human experience, some of which are disallowed in religious contexts. We talked about the need to be respectful of religious traditions while also insisting on the rigor that has to prevail in educational classrooms. It is important to emphasize that

objective, rational, knowledge-based, not belief-based, reality is the framework of the classroom, and that has to be maintained.

The other questions that arose had to do with how women just don't do well in science in Rwanda. It's the whole problem of women in STEM: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. CSW had a speaker's series on stereotype threat in STEM fields curated by Jenessa Shapiro and we discussed that research. Basically, if girls and boys internalize messages that boys are good at math and science, whereas girls are good at literature and social sciences, then a girl who might otherwise be excellent at math might not perform to her full ability. Research has found that if you remove that stereotype threat, performances balance out. We talked about what the ideas about gender performance and stem are in Rwanda, and if it's similar to that in the US. Turns out that it is! That was a very productive discussion.

The second presentation had to do with gender in education. I used two examples, one study from the Harvard Business School and one from the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology. At Harvard, entering women students—probably among the most talented, elite, privileged female students in the world, who often had run companies already and whose scores were equal to that of their male counterparts—got into the Harvard Business School and their performances plummeted. They made an institutional intervention—the elements of which we discussed—and things changed. The Kigali Institute of Science and Technology made a



Woman Strolls on Grounds of National University of Rwanda, Huye-Butare, Southern Rwanda. *Courtesy of Adam Jones, Ph.D., Wikimedia Commons*

Photos of the opening of the Women's Opportunity Center are available on the website of Women for Women International.

similar institutional intervention with women college students in the STEM fields, but whose performance was not up to par and their performance improved significantly. We discussed the classroom as not only an intellectual environment but also as a physical and social one, which needs to be characterized by safety—physical safety, social safety, and intellectual safety—without taking away intellectual challenge.

Kathie talked about the inclusion of gender and women in textbooks in Africa, which is substandard to say the least. We then had a very engaged and lengthy conversation about the threats to male privilege that come with the emphasis on gender equity. In other words, what is happening to males' traditions of privilege? We talked about same-sex education and the pros and cons of same-sex education in the Rwandan context. We considered male sense of safety vs. female sense of safety, and how they are different. That was also very productive, because it raised similar issues as our first Q&A session.

What is your continuing role, or the CSW's role, in this program at large?

It's a three-year grant, and we are currently sorting out plans for the future. Representatives from the University of Rwanda have come to UCLA, and we have gone to Rwanda. Now the real work begins! All the participants have written reports and recommendations.

Now we're going to convene and think about next steps. For me, those steps include asking: How to do

consciousness-raising in the Rwandan context and across different levels of education? What you do to raise consciousness in an elementary school context is very different from what you do at a university level. We want to consider how educators on the ground there can intervene in these kinds of issues, and also what is already being done that's promising. For example, there's a group of Rwandan men who are trying to intervene in traditional attitudes about male privilege. That's always helpful, when efforts towards progressive change come from the people holding the privilege.

Can UCLA students and faculty get involved?

I think that opportunities will arise, and they were certainly discussed in our smaller meetings with the Center for Gender, Culture, and Development. One of the things we discussed was exchange of students and possible ongoing relationships.

Are there any other highlights from the trip that you'd like to talk about?

An incredible highlight was going to the Women's Opportunity Center (see website: <http://www.womenforwomen.org/news-women-for-women/rwanda-womens-opportunity-center-opening.php>), which is located an hour outside of Kigali. Built with funds provided by Women for Women International, a group that supports women victims of war, the Center campus was designed pro bono by a US-based

architect for this beautiful plot of land in the countryside. It includes classrooms, dorm spaces, and high-end sleeping quarters for tourist/visitors. Each classroom is made of bricks, but porous, so that it's like lattice and the airflow goes in and out. The climate in Rwanda is very moderate. The buildings have these beautiful sweeping roofs that collect rainwater, and the rainwater goes into a cistern, where it's purified and can be used for drinking water. There is also a farm. Our host, the Center's dynamic director, Faith Tatou, together with local women affiliated with it, showed us all over the campus, which included a cheese-making room. It's set on a hill and it overlooks a farm run by one of the local women's cooperatives. The bricks—600,000!—were all made by the local women's brickmaking cooperative. During part of the presentation, we met with the women who are the heads of the Agricultural Collective and the Brickmaking Collective, and they showed how to make a brick. It is very much like making bread dough. You knead it, you salt it with sand, and you put it in a mold. That was really fascinating and a lot of work. With maybe eleven different buildings, the Center is very beautiful.

Ben Sher is a graduate student in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at UCLA and an editorial assistant and graduate student researcher at CSW.

Photo credits: page 4-5, Suburb of Kigali, 2009, Courtesy of RYTC, Wikimedia Commons; page 4, Members of partnership group, November 16, 2013, photo courtesy of *New Times*, Rwanda's daily newspaper.