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## Placing meaning making processes at the center of gender equality strategies in rural development

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My dissertation takes a deep dive into the ways in which local meaning influence the effectivity of gender equality strategies for rural development in Uganda. Taking a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis approach, the dissertation examines meaning making processes in different geographical and political spaces, highlighting the central role of interpretation in the performance of gender equality strategies.

The findings build on a 36-month stay in Kampala, Uganda, with frequent travel to four other regions in the country, namely Nwoya, Luwero, Rakai, and Mbale. Using a variety of methodologies (i.e. semi-structured interviews, multi-stakeholder meetings, policy document analysis, intra-household survey, focus group discussions, participant observation, questionnaires), the dissertation contributes and advances the field of social feminist geography by exploring intersections between discursive power, space, and meaning. In particular, it assesses how relations of gender are interpreted, contested and negotiated in different spaces, examining interlinkages between everyday local meaning making processes and global processes (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007). The dissertation highlights the gendered nature of local governments and national actors in Uganda, and the ensuing influence on how global gender norms are interpreted and adopted in local contexts, at the same time exposing tensions between global formulations and local

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translations, and the dilution of the transformational potential that often arises. The dissertation underscores the importance of examining meaning making processes in different geographical spaces and scales (national, district, sub-county), highlighting the often downplayed and understudied role and agency that local actors involved in processes of policy transfer and diffusion have.

I pay particular attention to the role of interpretation in processes of norm translation for gender equality. Drawing on the concept of 'policy translation' (Mukhtarov 2014) to expose and examine the processes of negotiation, re-ordering, displacement, dislocation, and transformation that are involved in the travel of policy ideas (Clarke et al. 2015), I show how processes of interpretation in policy translation can bring associated new meanings or usages that may consciously or unconsciously bring a dilution or neutralization of the potential for change of the original policy idea or norm.

I first examine the stories that policy actors use to relate to issues of gender mainstreaming in agriculture (Acosta, Wessel, Bommel, Ampaire, Jassogne, et al. 2020). These stories largely fit a gender equality narrative, where women are perceived to be a disadvantaged group in Uganda and where there is need to develop special policy provisions for them. However, despite this dominance, stories fitting the gender equality narrative are often interspersed with stories that followed a different narrative logic. These shifts in the narration conveyed a discursive engagement with gender equality that was accompanied by concurrent resistance, deconstruction and revocation, uncovering different power effects. In particular, they showed immediate discursive effects in questioning responsibilities, legitimizing policy inaction on gender issues, foregrounding and naturalizing patriarchy, and promoting the diversion of resources, with the overall effect of an implicit disempowerment of the gender equality narrative.

I then examine how global gender equality norms are translated into formal local policies at different governance levels (national, district, sub-county). The analysis shows different processes through which gender norms were translated in a way that simultaneously resonated with international discourses but left room for adjustments to domestic norms and logics (Acosta et al. 2019). These local adjustments involved, in particular, the following five processes: neglecting parts of the gender and climate change discourse in sub-national policy; the perpetuation of gender stereotypes; the oversimplification of the gender discourse; persistent acts of symbolic politics with stale reproduction of text; and proposing abstract gender activities with restricted economic allocations in budgets. Together, these processes of norm domestication enacted, naturalized or favored patriarchal representations of reality over others, reducing the transformative potential of the international norm on gender mainstreaming.

I continue with an in-depth study on the concept of ‘joint-decision making’ as one of the key gender constructs regularly used in district and national policy, and in many development programs in the country (Acosta, Wessel, Bommel, Ampaire, Twyman, et al. 2020). I show how the associated meaning found in formal policy discourse – in which an equal say of both spouses in the decision is implicit – differs widely from the understandings that women associate with the concept. Using the case study of Lodi in Northern Uganda, I show how women tended to report joint-decision making processes more often than men, and had a variety of understandings of what the concept meant for them in practice. As perceived by the women, the concept of joint-decision making never amounted to decisions where both spouses had an equal say in the discussion. The study highlights the importance of understanding how the people that are supposed to benefit from gender policies relate to gender equality and concepts of women’s empowerment. In the case of ‘joint decision making’, the ambiguous connotation in which the concept was used in policy and development projects in Uganda allowed for multiple interpretations to co-exist, including some that implied at best minimal change, to the patriarchal status quo.

Finally, I examine the potential of ‘local solutions’ to bridge the normative distance between transnational conceptualizations on gender and local realities (Acosta et al. 2021). I show how local policy actors largely mobilized global discourses on gender when asked about context-specific solutions to gender inequality. Furthermore, while local norms and culture were identified as one of the main barriers for gender equality, these were not directly tackled in the local solutions being proposed. In the study, the local solutions proposed used highly depoliticized global discourses on gender equality, often naturalizing gender inequalities, without any implications for gender relations in their contexts. The study highlights the key role that local feminist movements should have in bringing gender transformative localization and argues for the need to contextualize ‘the local’ as a space that provides room for discursive contestation.

Overall, my dissertation shows how local acts of meaning making contribute to gender policy inaction in agriculture and climate change in Uganda. Either unintentionally or intentionally, the discursive shifts, translations and localization processes that the dissertation uncovers naturalize and favor patriarchal local realities over global norms for gender equality, with the overall effect of limiting the effectiveness of the proposed gender actions, and ultimately depoliticizing gender.

Building on the dissertation findings, I claim that making gender policy more effective and transformative in nature requires a full examination and acknowledgement of local discursive processes – and the related micro-processes of resistance to gender equality. Local policy actors often need to navigate multiple co-existing normative environments so that they

can satisfy different 'audiences' (Cook, Turnhout, and van Bommel 2020), frequently adopting gender norms in a way that simultaneously resonate with international discourses but also allow for adjustments to local norms and logics. This is particularly true in cases where international norms on gender equality clashed with local norms and cultural beliefs (Petersen 2018). The development of more effective gender policies also requires capacity building and support for home-grown feminist organizations and local policy actors that, together with the backing of transnational gender norms and donors, can engage with the specifics of each context in order to achieve the desired transformation (Bock 2015). Such capacity building would benefit from the capacity to generate reflexivity in the multi-level policy system that governs gender equality, where local normative stances that continue to disadvantage women are collectively interrogated and reflected upon. This could create an opening to collectively find strategies to navigate these multiple normative contexts and realities in ways that could advance gender equality while also being mindful of local norms and traditions.

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### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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