Gender as a Development Tool: Depoliticisation, Crisis Discourse, and Academic Constraints

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Abstract

In this paper, I critically examine the use of gender as a development tool within the international development system, highlighting its depoliticisation, instrumentalisation, and disconnection from local epistemologies, especially in Africa. Although gender has been part of development discourse since the 1995 Beijing Conference, in its practical application it is often reduced to a technical framework, sidelining its transformative potential. Drawing on African feminist critiques, particularly the foundational works of Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, as well as contemporary analysis, the paper challenges the universalisation of Western gender constructs and emphasises alternative organising principles such as matrifocality and seniority. It also critiques the concept of "girling development" and the portrayal of women's empowerment as a means to achieve economic growth rather than a pursuit of structural change. Focusing on a case study of Mozambique, I analyse how donor-driven agendas shape gender and sexuality research at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, limiting theoretical engagement in favour of policy-oriented work. Ultimately, I advocate for a gender research approach grounded in local realities and knowledge systems, which would encourage epistemic contributions from the Global South that can reshape global gender discourses.

Keywords: gender, development, Mozambique, epistemology, knowledge production, donor agendas, academia

Introduction

The concept of gender has long been fundamental to academic discussions as a framework for analysing societal structures, roles, and identities. In Western feminist theory, gender is frequently viewed as a binary system closely connected to power dynamics and patriarchy. This perspective emphasises how societal norms and institutions uphold gender inequalities, often within a male-female dichotomy. Nevertheless, some scholars challenge this binary view, arguing that it may not universally apply and could misrepresent the social realities of different cultures.

Various feminist scholars have challenged the conceptualisation of gender. Several feminist authors from the Global South (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997; Lugones 2007; de Lima Costa 2016) have supported Mohanty's (1988) critique of the marginalised and stereotyped portrayals of Third World Women in which she emphasised that the concept of gender was rooted in Euro-North American cultural experiences, and that it either did not exist in precolonial societies or manifested in very different forms (Newman and Aoun 2024, 14–15). Crenshaw (1989) introduced race and intersectionality as central frameworks for gender analysis while Butler (1993; 1999) deployed performativity to reflect on the concept of gender.

Notably, Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí have critiqued the imposition of Western gender constructs on Nnobi and Yoruba, respectively, in Nigeria, demonstrating why such cultural constructs cannot be universally applied. Their arguments regarding seniority, motherhood and matrifocality reshape hegemonic understandings of gender as well as social and family organisation. Such insights have yet to be incorporated into the international development regime which, in programmes and initiatives in the Global South, has somewhat uncritically adopted the binary concept of gender.

Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, the integration of gender into international development discussions has significantly transformed policy and programme initiatives. Gender has become a widely adopted framework among civil society groups, policymakers, and development organisations, shaping various interventions and funding priorities. However, despite its

increased prominence, the way gender is operationalised within international development often depoliticises and instrumentalises the concept, undermining its transformative potential.

This paper examines the counterproductive ways gender is used within the international development system. It highlights how gender mainstreaming, although intended to promote equality, often reduces gender to a technical tool that fails to challenge existing power structures. Furthermore, integrating gender into development projects has turned feminist issues into professional concerns, shifting focus from political activism to bureaucratic efficiency. This shift has allowed international institutions to use gender in ways that often depart from feminist epistemologies and critical gender studies.

This analysis highlights a significant issue: how crisis discussions about gender in the Global South perpetuate colonial and racialised views of non-Western women and girls. The increasing focus on the "girling of development" (Khoja-Moolji 2020)—where young girls become the central figures of development initiatives—demonstrates the problematic depiction of gender issues through a Western neo-liberal lens that favours economic and social investment over fostering structural change. Additionally, the paper critiques how women's empowerment is often presented as a means to an end while gender equality is equated with the achievement of capitalist objectives or other developmental targets.

The paper further examines how these global dynamics are reflected in Mozambique's higher education sector, with a primary focus on gender and sexuality research at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane. It explores how international donor agendas shape academic research, often restricting critical and theoretical investigations of gender and sexuality in favour of a version of applied, policy-driven research that focuses on deliverables, log-frames and indicators that respond to predefined donor agendas and measurable outputs. The paper argues that this pattern results in the instrumentalisation of knowledge production, in which research is guided by external funding priorities rather than intellectual curiosity and the advancement of disciplines.

Ultimately, this analysis aims to illuminate the contradictions in the use of gender in international development and higher education. In the paper, I deconstruct these counterproductive practices and advocate for a gender

research approach in Mozambique that aligns with local realities, lived experiences and local knowledge systems, offering distinct epistemic contributions. Thus, it demonstrates how knowledge production from the Global South – here understood as encompassing people with heterogeneous experiences but analytically a zone of belonging elsewhere (Khoja-Moolji 2020) – can expand, challenge, and debate concepts and perspectives within the global social sphere rather than being narrowed and provincialised to the South.

Theoretical frames of gender in international development

The incorporation of gender into international development has historically been influenced by various feminist genealogies and global political moments. Women in Development (WID) arose from the first two waves of feminism – though one must acknowledge that "wave" is not an unproblematic metaphor. The first wave – the women's suffrage movement – saw women in North America campaigning for equal voting rights and political participation. The second wave addressed ongoing social and cultural inequalities faced by women (Khoja-Moolji 2020), such as reproductive rights, sexual violence, sexual discrimination, and the glass ceiling. The lived experiences of white middle-class women heavily shaped these Western feminist perspectives.

Feminist scholars, including African and postcolonial voices, critiqued universalising assumption feminist genealogies informed by the West and how it rendered invisible the impact of other forms of discrimination such as race and class (Crenshaw 1989). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) notes how the focus on 'coital and conjugal' sites marginalised broader questions of economic and cultural autonomy, especially in African contexts where kinship and reproduction are socially organised through collective rather than nuclear family structures.

Women and Development (WAD) emerged as a response to critiques of WID's failure to address structural inequalities. Influenced by Marxist and socialist feminism, WAD emphasised the exploitation of women under capitalism, highlighting women's labour in both productive and reproductive spheres. However, WAD also carried assumptions shaped by Western economic

models and often generalised women's conditions in the Global South without considering their specific and diverse histories and epistemologies.

A more radical shift occurred with Gender and Development (GAD), which introduced gender as a relational and power-laden concept. Instead of merely adding women to development, GAD promoted analysis of gender roles and expectations focused on material aspects of women's subordination and viewed gender relations as power relations. This shift was important but also had its limitations. Early GAD approaches often reinforced binary oppositions between women and men, neglecting intra-gender dynamics, queer and non-binary identities, and power relations among women themselves. Furthermore, the household, a key unit of analysis in GAD, reflected Eurocentric assumptions about nuclear families and did not represent the diversity of family structures in other regions, including Africa.

What followed in the 1990s was the formal integration of gender within development agendas, particularly after the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. Mainstreaming Gender Equality became a policy tool for ensuring that gender issues were incorporated into all programmes and policies. However, in practice, mainstreaming often involved merely ticking boxes, generating gender indicators, and reducing gender to a managerial concern. The feminist call for transformation was replaced by a discourse of inclusion and efficiency. Feminists from the Global South introduced the language of women's empowerment to challenge women's exclusion from economic and political life (Cornwall 2014). Yet, by the 2000s, the concept of empowerment itself had been co-opted.

Empowerment came to signify investing in women and girls not for their own emancipation but to achieve broader development goals. This shift—from fostering critical consciousness to a focus on investment—reflected the increasing alignment between international development efforts and corporate interests. As Batliwala (cited in Cornwall 2014, 130) notes, the feminist foundations of empowerment were gradually replaced by a market-driven discourse. Stripped of its political significance, gender was seen as a means to improve health, alleviate poverty, and promote economic growth (Cornwall 2014).

Thus, from early gender-blind models, development discourse shifted towards including women and girls in economic and social agendas. Today, gender is often seen as a means for efficiency rather than as a basis for the pursuit of equity. This shift is evident in frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, which frequently neglect issues of power and justice. Such frameworks reflect an instrumentalist logic in which gender equality is viewed as a way to promote economic growth or stability rather than as an end in itself.

Instrumentalism in development operates under the assumption that investing in women produces measurable benefits: more productive economies, healthier families, and lower fertility rates, for example. As Naila Kabeer (2015) notes, this reflects a conflation of gender relations with poverty, which legitimises policy relevance over political struggle. The appeal of instrumentalist logic lies in its compatibility with donor demands for quantifiable outcomes and its alignment with neoliberal forms of governance that prioritise efficiency over transformation.

What has been lost in this instrumentalist turn is precisely the political imagination that shaped earlier feminist critiques. By focusing on equity, justice, and epistemic plurality, feminist scholarship from the Global South—particularly in Africa—offers pathways for rethinking development beyond managerialism. The following sections examine how these critiques are articulated, both in scholarship and in development practice, and how they reveal the limits of dominant approaches to gender in the Global South.

Is gender a universally valuable concept?

In contemporary African thought, an increasing number of scholars of gender and feminist studies are engaging with the concepts of seniority and matrifocality. These concepts have developed from ethnographic descriptions into strong analytical and epistemological tools. Rather than simply portraying static traditions or family structures, these frameworks reveal complex dynamics of power, social reproduction and resistance, especially in ways that gender-based analyses alone might miss. As the analysis will show, various contemporary African scholars have demonstrated how these concepts allow

for a rethinking of authority and kinship beyond colonial and Western paradigms.

The early theoretical foundations of this shift were laid by African postcolonial feminists such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. Amadiume (1987), in her study of the matricentric society of Nnobi in southeastern Nigeria, introduced the concepts of "female husbands" and "male daughters" to illustrate a social system organised around not binary gender roles but seniority and lineage. Women in positions of economic or genealogical power could marry wives and control land, with kinship and political authority defined through matrilineal lines. This practice is not exclusive to matricentric societies as it is also common in patrilineal societies, where wealthy and childless women play the role of the husband in every sense except engaging in sexual intercourse with the wife (though she chooses/approves a sexual partner for her wife). In patrilineal societies, children from such a marriage trace their lineage through their (female) father, not their mother, as among the Nandi in Kenya (Oboler 1980, Kendall 1995). Oyěwùmí (1997), analysing Yoruba society, argued that kinship categories encoded seniority rather than gender, challenging the assumption that gender is a universal organising principle. She criticised the Western "biologic" that naturalises gender hierarchies and showed how Yoruba social organisation revolves around age and seniority, not sex-based classification.

These early critiques paved the way for a broader epistemic rupture with the universalist application of gender in feminist and development discourse. They drew attention to the cultural specificity of gendered categories and laid the groundwork for a new wave of scholarship that reframes matrifocality and seniority as dynamic, historically contingent, and politically generative.

Building on this foundation, recent scholarship has deepened and expanded the analytical scope of these concepts. Graness and Kopf (2024) argue that seniority functions as a counter-epistemology to Western individualist models of authority, allowing for forms of leadership grounded in relational accountability and intergenerational responsibility. Magoqwana and Göçek (2024) similarly emphasise the epistemic authority of senior women, reframing them as agents of cultural continuity and political influence.

Matrifocality, too, is increasingly theorised as a lens through which to analyze social organisation in ways that subvert patriarchal norms. Madhavan et al. (2018) and Yacob-Haliso (2025) document how matrifocal households respond adaptively to conditions such as male labour migration and the weakening of state institutions. These households centre women not merely as caregivers but as decision-makers, economic providers, and community leaders. The matrifocal family thus becomes a site of both resistance and innovation, reconfiguring social reproduction in ways that challenge conventional gender binaries.

This re-theorisation also confronts colonial historiography, which frequently depicted matrifocal and seniority-based systems as anarchic or regressive. Colonial ethnographers and administrators often viewed African societies through patriarchal lenses, interpreting female authority or non-gendered hierarchies as deviations from normative progress. Contemporary scholars, such as Grillo (2018), reclaim these systems as coherent, moral and politically intentional. Grillo's analysis of female genital power —women's use of their genitals to demonstrate spiritual and moral power that influences the affairs of their societies —underscores the centrality of these frameworks to ethical and political life.

The intersection of seniority and matrifocality provides a particularly rich avenue for exploring a path of African feminist epistemologies. Instead of relying solely on gender as the primary axis of analysis, these concepts emphasise how authority, belonging, and agency are negotiated through age, relationality, and embeddedness within kinship networks. Studies by Frehiwot (2022) demonstrate how matrifocal structures, especially when led by senior women, create alternative modes of governance, care, and resistance that escape both colonial and liberal feminist frameworks.

These developments have not occurred without internal contestation. Oyěwùmí's critique of gender as irrelevant in Yoruba society, for example, sparked debate within African feminist circles. Bakare-Yusuf cautioned against generalising about the continent based on Yoruba practices and stressed the need to examine how power, age, and gender interact in historically dynamic ways (2004). Charmaine Pereira reframed the issue, asking how specific conceptualisations of gender may either enable or restrict agency depending

on context (2004). Such exchanges exemplify the ongoing evolution and reflection within African feminist theorisation.

Importantly, these theoretical advances are not about romanticising precolonial institutions or reclaiming authenticity. Rather, they are part of a broader decolonial project that seeks to develop concepts rooted in lived realities and capable of responding to contemporary challenges. Frehiwot (2022), for example, demonstrates how matrifocality informs the Made in Africa Evaluation framework, which privileges community-defined wellbeing over external metrics. This framework embodies a shift away from imported categories and toward locally grounded, theoretically rich approaches to development and knowledge production.

In sum, the concepts of seniority and matrifocality have evolved from early critiques of Western gender epistemologies into sophisticated tools for rethinking power, resistance, and social reproduction. From the foundational works of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí to the more recent contributions of Frehiwot, Magoqwana, and Yacob-Haliso, scholars have demonstrated the theoretical depth and political relevance of these frameworks. Their ongoing refinement challenges the dominance of Eurocentric models in feminist theory and development practice, affirming the intellectual sovereignty of these lines of feminist thought from the African continent and expanding the horizon of decolonial knowledge production.

Counterproductive uses of gender in the context of development

Gender fragmentation, depoliticisation and professionalisation

Following the Beijing Conference, the international development regime saw gender become a common discursive tool among civil society groups, donors and policymakers at multiple levels of government globally. Gender owed its globalisation to GAD, especially through its integration into aid conditionalities. This has had major effects in the Global South, including shaping national policies, generating new ministries and departments, and boosting the number of NGOs focused on these issues (Newman and Aoun 2024).

Since the 2000s, United Nations agencies have played a pivotal role in redefining feminist ideas surrounding bodily integrity, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as concepts of sexuality, girlhood, and peace. Such an approach has taken the form of "one-size-fits-all" in many development initiatives, which often fail to consider the local contexts and cultural dynamics that shape women's lives. Feminists have been vocal in highlighting the setbacks of mainstreaming gender equality. Among other challenges, one issue centres on the way gender is utilised by various institutions within international development, which often fragments and depoliticises the concept itself (McFadden and Twasiima 2018; Cornwall 2014; Baden and Goetz 1997) and professionalises it (Nyambura 2018). Baden and Goetz articulate the problem:

> The variety of ways in which gender has come to be institutionalised and operationalised in the development arena encompasses a disjuncture between the feminist intent behind the term and the ways in which it is employed such as to minimise the political and contested character of relations between women and men (…) the concept of gender in development tends to be used in a descriptive manner in which the question of power is easily removed (Baden and Goetz 1997, 10).

Thus, the depoliticisation of gender signifies the neutralisation of its transformative potential, while its professionalisation involves transforming it into a technical term that satisfies bureaucratic demands. The redefinition of feminist ideas in international development, which has led to the fragmentation and depoliticisation of gender, is evident in several related patterns. The technocratisation of gender through gender mainstreaming has turned a once-political call for structural change into a bureaucratic process. New participants have entered the field: statisticians, economists, and econometricians are engaging in gender research to meet the rising demand from development bureaucracies for studies, analyses, and new gender-sensitive policies. Unfortunately, these newcomers often lack a commitment to feminist research and may be unfamiliar with core concepts, methodologies, and literature. As a result, development actors now emphasise measurable indicators, audits, and compliance mechanisms, often without critical engagement with issues of power and inequality. Consequently, gender is increasingly regarded as merely a statistical variable—reduced to a simple dichotomy of woman and man—

while ignoring relational dynamics, power structures, the structural roots of inequality, ideologies, and the ways privilege and disadvantage are perpetuated through a focus on procedural compliance rather than political transformation (Baden and Goetz 1997; Kanmodi et al. 2023; Newman and Aoun 2024).

Development institutions commodify feminist discourse and reshape feminism from a political identity into a more fashionable and socially acceptable idea. Mainstreaming gender positions it within a liberal philosophical framework that fails to adequately reveal or confront existing systems of power and privilege, and therefore undermines feminism's transformative potential. Consequently, international development has stripped gender of its critical, radical analytical capacity and has depoliticised women's interactions with patriarchy. As Bennett (2024) notes, feminist ideals are appropriated as branding strategies in development programmes and corporate social responsibility campaigns. This not only dilutes feminism's political edge but also reinforces the very structures of inequality it aims to dismantle. To cite an additional example, the term gender based violence refers to patriarchal violations and sexual impunity. However, this technocratic phrase holds little conceptual or theoretical significance in empowering women against patriarchal abuse and supremacist behaviour (McFadden and Twasiima 2018).

The development discourse often depends on technological optimism that ignores political engagement. Achiba (2019) shows how emphasis on ambitious, depoliticised technical solutions overlooks local power dynamics and indigenous knowledge systems. Women's rights and gender justice are often subordinated to wider economic narratives, leading to fragmented and decontextualised approaches to gender.

These patterns of fragmentation, depoliticisation, and gender professionalisation reveal a profound shift in the role of gender within the international development regime — from a framework rooted in struggle, solidarity, and structural critique to one aligned with technocratic governance and market rationality. Gender is no longer mobilised to expose or confront power, but is instead instrumentalised to deliver measurable outputs, appease donor requirements, and sustain depoliticised interventions. The transformation of feminist concepts into neutralised development jargon obscures the historical and political struggles from which they emerged.

Without a deliberate re-politicisation of gender — anchored in local contexts, collective action, and epistemic diversity — development risks perpetuating the very inequalities it claims to address.

Girling of development

A second concern emerged due to the dynamics of the last two decades. The international development regime has applied a discourse of crisis to gender dynamics in the Global South. On the one hand, the discourse was inspired by the continued understanding of gender relations as an oppositional system in which women and men are presumed to have no interests in common. On the other hand, the discourse is anchored in the shift in the meaning of women's empowerment from a pursuit of critical consciousness and collective action to an interest in investing in women and girls, which coincided with the growing appeal of international development to the corporate sector.

The crisis, often described as 'the girling of development' or a 'turn to the girl' (Hayhurst 2011; Switzer 2013; cited in Khoja-Moolji 2020) because of its concentration on girls, reflects both a continuation and a transformation of gender instrumentalism. While early feminist critiques rejected the image of passive Third World women in need of rescue, donor discourses increasingly depict girls—particularly in the Global South—as subjects in transition, whose value lies in their potential contributions to development. This point is borne out by the multitude of development campaigns targeting girls' education, menstrual hygiene, child marriage, breast ironing, and female genital cutting, and by concerns around girls' sexual activity and sexual violence.

This crisis discourse frames the body of the girl from the Global South – the non-white girl – as other. The development gaze homogenises girls, cast as passive beneficiaries or entrepreneurial agents, without acknowledging their embeddedness in families, communities, and contested power relations. Girls' bodies are treated as sites for technical intervention—whether to delay childbirth, increase contraceptive uptake, or deliver sanitary pads. Such treatment reproduces colonial tropes of non-Western girlhood as inherently backward and in need of saving, which are repackaged through neoliberal aspirations of investment and productivity. This crisis discourse, as argued by

Khoja-Moolji, "legitimise[s] narratives and logics that can become the new norm, occasioning multiple forms of exclusions and marginalisations (…) participating in bringing third world/Global South girls under the purview of biopolitical and necropolitical renderings of different human lives as having differential value" (Khoja-Moolji 2020, 66).

Critics have pointed out the gap between programme objectives and local realities, the lack of intersectional perspectives, and the limited space for adolescent girls' own political agency. They have demonstrated that redefining empowerment as merely training or cash assistance, without addressing the material and symbolic structures that influence girls' lives, risks reinforcing the very inequalities it aims to dismantle (Boyd 2016).

The 'girling' of development becomes another form of gender instrumentalism that emphasises donor interests, directs resources and creates success stories, often at the expense of feminist politics and social justice. Without tackling the underlying power structures, such programmes risk offering visibility instead of genuine change. This approach has wide-ranging consequences. By depicting girls as vulnerable victims and untapped resources, development efforts oversimplify complex socio-political issues into technical solutions. This shifts the focus away from collective action and feminist organising, instead placing the onus for change solely on girls. It marginalises boys, overlooks the role of adult men and elders in upholding gender norms, and excludes systemic actors such as the state and traditional institutions from accountability. Additionally, it risks reinforcing racialised and colonial stereotypes of the girl from the Global South as passive and dependent on external salvation. These narratives undermine girls' political agency and support a donor-driven development agenda that prioritises short-term results over enduring justice.

Global South women as a neoliberal asset

The third problematic use of gender relates to the women's empowerment approach adopted by the international development regime, which utilises women for capitalist gains and to achieve other development objectives. This approach reinforces stereotypical gender traits that development initially aims

to challenge. Investing in women is presented to policymakers not merely as a means to fulfil their obligations to gender equality and women's rights but also as a strategy to stimulate economic growth and attain other development goals, such as investing in women's education to support population control, child welfare, and nutrition. This approach has successfully convinced international development banks, bilateral agencies, and corporate donors that paying attention to women produces tangible benefits (Cornwall 2014).

The World Bank's policy document for Beijing essentially justified its focus on gender through efficiency, aligning women's interests with the promotion of economic liberalisation: "Sound economic policies and well-functioning markets are essential for growth, employment and the creation of an environment in which the returns to investing in women and girls can be fully realised" (World Bank cited in Baden and Goetz 1997, 9)

Framed within the logic of "smart economics," women are depicted as untapped assets whose economic inclusion will generate gains in productivity, health, and social stability—thus aligning feminist objectives with donor efficiency metrics. The Girl Effect by the Nike Foundation is an example. It was labelled as the "highest return investment strategy" to alleviate poverty, portraying girls as key economic actors. However, as Boyd (2016) argues, beneath the facade of promoting gender equality and empowerment, financialised language, expressed in phrases such as "credit markets," "untapped resources for cheap labour," and "debtors," reveals how girls are reconceptualised as economic assets rather than rights-holding individuals. Boyd further asserts that such programmes deepen inequality on multiple levels. Personally, girls are shaped into market-ready subjects tasked with addressing development challenges. Systemically, their labour and consumption are exploited to sustain debt-driven economies and low-wage markets, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging neoliberal structures.

The smart economics narrative is particularly evident in microfinance initiatives and entrepreneurship programmes that focus on women's self-reliance through access to credit or business training. As Boeri (2018) observes, such programmes often reinforce neoliberal ideals by shaping women into entrepreneurial subjects while the state withdraws from broader responsibilities for ensuring economic justice. The logic of self-sufficiency masks the structural

barriers—such as informal labour markets, unequal care burdens, and discriminatory inheritance laws—that limit women's agency. Wilson (2015) critiques this form of neoliberal feminism which conflates market participation with empowerment and overlooks systemic change.

In summary, framing women in the Global South as neoliberal assets undermines the potential for feminist change. It encourages a form of economic citizenship that is conditional, instrumental, and often exploitative. Without addressing the intersecting inequalities that influence women's lives—such as class, race, geography, age, and sexuality—development risks merely reproducing the very systems of exclusion it aims to dismantle. This approach also overlooks the inherently gendered nature of institutions themselves.

After analysing the problematic uses of gender within the international development regime and reflecting on the widespread consequences for women, men and society in the Global South, the paper will now turn to the specific case of Mozambique.

Navigating donor agendas: Gender research in Mozambique's higher education

This section will analyse gender research production at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM) in Mozambique, where I am a lecturer and researcher. Most scholarly research on gender and sexuality in Mozambique takes place at universities, particularly at UEM, the country's flagship institution. Since the 1980s, UEM has maintained a strong tradition of research on women and gender through the Centre of African Studies (Casimiro and Andrade 2005) as well as the departments of Anthropology, History, and Sociology. A notable exception is the feminist non-governmental organisation Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust (WLSA – Mozambique), which separated from UEM's Centre of African Studies in 2003 to establish itself as an independent entity (Casimiro and Andrade 2010). While WLSA — which operated independently from 2003 until its closure in 2023—has been highly regarded as a feminist research institution in Mozambique, I am interested in gender and/or feminist research that has contributed to theory rather than through action-research and activism, as was the case with WLSA.

The dynamics of research production at UEM reflect a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and external factors.

Human capital continues to be a key constraint on research production at UEM. Although the proportion of academic staff with postgraduate training has risen, most faculty still do not hold doctoral degrees. The university offers a limited number of PhD courses, with doctoral students making up only one per cent of the total university's student population (Gabinete do Reitor UEM 2024). This creates a bottleneck in local postgraduate training and leads to dependence on external institutions, especially in Sweden, Belgium—through major training partnership programmes—as well as Portugal, Brazil, and South Africa. Such reliance often results in the reproduction of foreign theoretical frameworks, further restricting the development of indigenous research agendas, since donors usually have their own thematic priorities, which often differ from those of individual academics (Cloete et al. 2015, 121). This capacity gap affects not only the volume, but also the scope and depth of research outputs.

Chronic underfunding of research remains a crucial issue. The government's allocation to higher education has traditionally been very limited. Only a small portion of UEM's operational budget is assigned to research activities, as reported annually by the Rector (Gabinete do Reitor UEM 2024).Most research thus depends heavily on external funds and grants from development agencies, international organisations, and partnerships with foreign universities, a situation which leads to challenges related to sustainability and alignment with local priorities. Internal funding sources, such as the university's research fund (*Fundo de Investigação Científica*), remain inadequate and highly competitive. The absence of institutional support for fieldwork, data analysis tools, and publication costs significantly restricts the potential for sustained, independent research. Moreover, access to international journals, databases, and conference travel remains limited and uneven across faculties, which exacerbates inequalities in research output.

The internal governance and academic culture at UEM also influence research practices. Institutional incentives for publishing remain weak and inconsistent. The UEM's strategic plan articulates ambitions to become a research-led university, yet the mechanisms to implement this vision remain limited. The

Informes Anuais do Reitor (Vice-Chancellor's Annual Reports), published yearly since 2012, frequently identify the fragmentation of research efforts as a barrier to building a coherent institutional research profile.

The focus on research that directly promotes economic growth is widespread in the discourse surrounding funding in Mozambique. Research agendas are increasingly designed to produce results that support national development goals—particularly in sectors likely to yield economic benefits, such as agriculture, health, and technology. Therefore, perhaps the most noticeable influence on research at UEM comes from international donors. Thematic areas such as gender, health, the environment, and governance dominate due to the priorities of donor agencies and international NGOs (Cloete et al. 2015). These agendas are often part of externally funded projects, which have predefined methods, output formats, and deadlines. Donor-led research usually concentrates on results and aims at policy advice, leaving little room for theoretical innovation or long-term investigation. For example, the rise in baseline studies and evaluations commissioned by development partners has increased research activity but has also made it more short-term and applied. In many cases, academic staff are employed as consultants, further blurring the line between scholarly work and service provision.

Comparison with other universities in Africa indicates that the impact of donor influence depends on the specific context. At Makerere University, a large share of research funding comes from external donors, which restricts institutional independence and impels research to align with donor priorities (Kaweesi 2020). Academic staff have reported limited internal incentives for theoretical research and weak institutional management of research (Namuwonge 2024). In contrast, the University of Botswana benefits from substantial public investment and is less dependent on international aid, especially concerning the allocation of research and development funds (Cloete et al. 2015).

The evidence from UEM indicates a multi-causal explanation for research patterns. Capacity and resource limitations restrict the scope of potential research, while weak institutional incentives impede efforts to develop a coherent research agenda. Donor agendas, although they provide funding,

often impose thematic and methodological constraints that sideline critical, locally grounded scholarship.

UEM has invested in transforming itself into a research-led university, with a 2018–2028 strategic plan outlining the steps to expand and enhance research and research output. However, it still maintains a bookish teaching system that is centred on the teacher, favours the method of vertical transmission (top to bottom, teacher to student), and is structured around the classroom. Research remains a subsidiary activity, conducted when time permits after the primary activity of teaching (Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015). Consequently, the country, and the university as well, continues to lack a strong research culture, which is reflected in low research outputs and limited postgraduate enrolments. At UEM, the largest university in Mozambique by enrolment, more than 95% of students are undergraduates (Monteiro 2010 and Bunting 2014 cited in Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015).

In response to changes in higher education policies that mandated all university staff to begin their careers with at least a Master's degree, the university formed partnerships with bilateral collaborators to train its personnel. Many UEM staff travelled abroad to pursue Master's and PhD degrees. Those receiving training for their academic qualifications were the main contributors to research on gender and sexuality at UEM. The training programmes with bilateral partners often focused on themes that aligned with the country's development agenda, addressing areas in which collaborating countries were investing within Mozambique. For example, Belgium, through the Flemish-funded training programme titled *Development in Sexual and Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Family Affairs through Interuniversity Multidisciplinary Research,* concentrated on these topics. The products of this 10-year programme (2008 to 2018) included 19 PhD and 29 Master's graduates, most of them staff at UEM, trained in Belgium in the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, Law, Statistics and Medicine, including Public Health. The research topics included: the country's response to the human rights obligation to protect children from sexual abuse; women's sexual and reproductive rights at work; social protection law in respect of people living with HIV and AIDS; reproductive inability in diverse medical systems in the country; pregnancy practices among HIV mothers; lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activism rights; communication and sexual and reproductive

health challenges for adolescents; maternal mortality at health units; induced abortion under the new abortion legislation; intimate partner violence and implications for medical curricula; factors associated with sero-discordance among couples in Mozambique; and men's representation of family planning.

Internally, both undergraduate and postgraduate students form an additional group that generates research through their end-of-course theses. Collectively, as lecturers and supervisors in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, one of the main challenges we identify during term meetings is students' inability to elaborate on anthropological questions that could guide their research. Students formulate questions aimed at addressing social issues rather than rendering social reality comprehensible.

Other sources of research funding include NGOs that set themes based on their agendas and allocate funds for students or lecturers to carry out research. Both the university and the country generally lack competitive research grants. Researchers rarely compete for or secure international competitive funding. It is common for professionals to undertake consultancy projects for donors, development agencies, as well as national and international NGOs operating within the country, as discussed in depth by Gonçalves (2019). As a result, much of the knowledge produced at the UEM on gender and sexuality is instrumentalist. Most of the research addresses programme-related questions from international development actors and bilateral partners. It does not prioritise theoretical, methodological, conceptual, or epistemological questions. Consequently, academic output tends to respond to societal demands rather than pose questions that promote reflection.

The impact of such a scenario on knowledge production concerning gender and sexuality is that international development influences shape the research agenda at universities. There is little or no critique of this situation. An example is the Master's in Gender and Development, which started in 2020 with an average of 20 students per year, and which is often utilised by students (frequently professionals in the field of international development) to gain capital as consultants or development workers and advantages outside academia rather than focused on understanding social and cultural dynamics of gender for theoretical, epistemological or methodological inquiry.

The scenario underscores a missed opportunity to incorporate everyday experiences and ordinary lived realities into our engagements in studies about Africa. As a result, only a few scholars specialising in gender and sexuality at the UEM participate in the global scientific community, and they are the exception. Their work presents intriguing gender analyses that deserve further investigation.

Specifically at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, some colleagues conducted research in the early 2000s, most of which was part of their thesis development and provides us with interesting insights. The works fall into two different categories: critical approaches to mainstream gender and sexuality themes and poorly explored or unexplored themes.

Carla Braga explored, in her (2001) article, the *cicigale*, a conjugal residence system among the matrilineal Ayao in Niassa. The *cicigale* governs marriage and residence within the framework of matrilineal norms and local notions of authority, kinship, and legitimacy. In Braga's words, "the *cicigale* arrangement reflects female-centred domestic spaces, where senior women exercise authority over household land and decision-making, particularly in agricultural production and social reproduction". The epistemic significance of *cicigale* lies in how it redefines gendered power—not as a reflection of male domination over women, but as a negotiation of relational positions within a matrilineal social structure. Additionally, it influences how authority is defined and enacted by revealing how women's seniority and status within the lineage structure determine their influence over land, labour, and domestic resources.

Emidio Gune (2008) raised key questions regarding the social meanings of sexual and reproductive technologies, particularly the condom, in Mozambique under the HIV pandemic. He challenges us to recognise that while the condom itself is a new technology, the concept and use of similar devices are not, including in Mozambique. This prompts him to be critical of the assumption that a lack of education or ignorance explains the non-use of condoms. He highlights how the social and cultural meanings of personhood — which include the notion of the fractal person (Taylor 1990), social interaction, and sexual significance — are often ignored in such discussions. Gune's perspective encourages a better understanding of the meanings and values of sexual intercourse.

Esmeralda Mariano (2009) reflects on the social status and role of the *Sungukati*, a woman who has reached menopause, a matron and a woman of authority. A woman in this category plays a vital role in maintaining peace and harmony within the community by offering advice and guidance to younger women and couples, and is regarded as a resourceful person at both family and community levels. As a result, she is highly esteemed. By understanding *Sugukati*, one can reframe gender hierarchies beyond biological or sex differences to include gerontocracy and stages of life.

My own work takes intersectionality seriously by demonstrating how class serves to level gendered relations among cosmopolitans in urban Maputo (Manuel 2023). Young adult cosmopolitans' non-heteronormative sexual practices and the politics of managing emotional and intimate attachments in sexual relationships prompt timid transformations in gender praxis, thus indicating greater equity, more autonomous sexual lives for women, and the emergence of discourses around the control of the masculine body. Class serves as a marker here, as it levels gendered relations that, in the context of Southern Africa, have been widely examined under the discourse of inequality, particularly in relation to poverty and unequal access to resources.

These hints—emerging from research that has not yet been consistently explored due to the challenges of resources, time, and the pressure for uniformity in the understanding of gender advanced by the development regime—are revealing. They enable an expansion of understanding into how people organise their lives beyond the constraints of restrictive concepts.

The imposition of external knowledge systems through globalised knowledge production can weaken local epistemologies that offer more contextually appropriate solutions (Newman and Aoun, 2024). Similar power dynamics that impose foreign agendas and understandings of GAD disempower local communities. Furthermore, Kanmodi et al. (2023) highlight the global inequities in research production, where English-language dominance marginalises Global South voices and skews policy relevance towards reinforcing rather than challenging existing power structures. These dynamics result in missed opportunities for systemic change that addresses poverty and gender inequality. Addressing these inequalities requires cultivating a locally rooted research culture that confronts global power

imbalances and truly reflects the lived experiences of Mozambican communities.

In a complex way, the limited display and description of my colleagues' unfinished work in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology show the recognised risk that such rich and epistemologically challenging research questions will be taken up by other scholars with more time and resources from outside the continent. My colleagues and I grappled with how this subsection should be written to highlight the potential of anthropological research rooted in lived experiences without denying them the chance to advance their scholarship. The data presented here offers ways to understand gender anchored kinship roles, emerging social status, social organisation, and stages of life. Such perspectives constitute a departure from a conceptualisation of gender as rooted solely in hierarchised biological sex differences. These insights highlight the need for partnerships, joint research, and research funding to further explore gender in sites such as the ones mentioned in various texts in this issue.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the international development regime has co-opted and depoliticised the concept of gender, removing its critical, transformative potential. By presenting gender as a technical solution to developmental issues, international institutions have turned it into a managerial instrument—measurable, depersonalised, and easily aligned with donor priorities. The result has been the widespread instrumentalisation of women and girls in the Global South, the erasure of feminist political struggles, and the silencing of alternative epistemologies rooted in local contexts.

The case of Mozambique—specifically, the dynamics of gender and sexuality research at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane—reveals how international donor agendas shape academic inquiry and restrict the development of critical gender thought. The dominance of policy-driven, externally funded research has pushed aside theoretical innovation, limited intellectual independence, and overlooked local knowledge systems. While fragments of critical and epistemologically rich research do exist, they remain

underexplored, unsupported, and not visible or impactful in a Global North-dominated academic context.

A closer engagement with alternative organising principles—such as local notions of personhood, diverse social organising systems, and ways to foster well-being for individuals and families; the different criteria that confer status on individuals (age, kinship position, social role within the community); and the meanings that different people attach to practices and social categories—can broaden the analytical scope of gender studies beyond imported and universalised categories. Recognising the historical, cultural, and institutional forces that shape knowledge production is therefore essential to understanding both the limitations and potential of gender as a conceptual and analytical tool in the Global South.

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