



# Gender sensitisation in the Zambian Copperbelt

Alice Evans

Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2 2AE, United Kingdom



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender sensitisation in Kitwe, Zambia. My evidence, derived from a year's ethnographic research, suggests that gender sensitisation is most effective when participants are also exposed to flexibility of gender divisions of labour. Seeing a critical mass of women performing socially valued roles appears to be interpreted as validation of abstract messages of equality. Such synergy is most commonly enabled when gender sensitisation is participatory. By sharing experiences of flexibility in gender divisions of labour, group discussants often come to publicly question widely-shared assumptions about men and women's differing competence and status. Hearing others express support for gender equality also shifts presumptions about cultural expectations.

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## Introduction

Drawing on qualitative research, this paper investigates the conditions under which gender sensitisation programmes have facilitated the rejection of gender beliefs and related inequalities in Kitwe, Zambia. 'Gender sensitisation' refers to interventions that encourage participants to question taken-for-granted gender stereotypes, relating to competence and status. The mode of such awareness-raising activities varies, from information-provision to participatory discussions. Advocates of sensitisation envisage that, by collectively deconstructing behavioural prescriptions as well as stereotypes about men and women's typical traits, participants will become more supportive of gender equality.

This paper aims to understand which forms of sensitisation are most effective and why some participants are more persuaded than others. These empirical insights about how individuals come to reject their gender beliefs shed light on broader theoretical debates about how gender is undone. Another major, ongoing discussion in gender theory concerns whether sex-differentiated practices are primarily due to causes operating at the individual or interactional level of analysis. This paper will show that these two theories can be empirically tested and appear to be valid in different instances. Furthermore, they appear to share much more in common than hitherto thought.

## Literature review

This paper examines how gender sensitisation impacts gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. Gender stereotypes are

assumptions about the differing competencies of the typical man and woman. If men are seen as more competent in socially valued domains then they may be deemed more worthy of status, respect, esteem and influence ('gender status beliefs', Ridgeway, 2011). Even if an individual does not personally endorse gender stereotypes (relating to competence or status) they may still be motivated to comply due to the presumption that others in their society do and will evaluate their conduct in accordance with 'cultural expectations'.

Self-regulated conformity is thus motivated by concerns about what is accepted by others – as signalled by their discourse and behaviour. In contrast with this conceptualisation, performative accounts of gender norms place greater emphasis on their iterative, behavioural enactments. For Butler (2004: 48–51) 'the norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstituted in and through the daily rituals of bodily life. The norm has no independent ontological status... it is itself reproduced through its embodiments... [Norms] must be understood as forms of action'. Accordingly, gender is subverted if individuals de-emphasise difference by adhering to norms applicable to the opposite sex category.

One limitation of this conceptualisation is that it obscures different causes of conformity with sex-differentiated practices: whether they are universally endorsed or whether some privately wish to deviate from them. We need to identify these underlying causes (rather than their embodied effects) in order to grasp how social change might occur. Iterative performances are not underlying causes of sex-differentiated practices; they are only instrumentally important in so far as they signal which kinds of conduct will be approved of by others. Although the disruption of the regulatory power of gender will be apparent through behavioural deviation

E-mail address: [a.evans@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.evans@lse.ac.uk)

from dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, it will be *caused* by the growing disavowal of gender difference, stereotypes and related assessments. On this reading, gender is not undone when a man voices his appreciation of silky fabrics but rather when others do not disapprove of his doing so.

Because these two analytical concepts – internalised gender stereotypes and cultural expectations – often have similar empirical implications, it can be difficult to determine which is the primary cause of compliance with sex-differentiated practices. Some theorists exclusively champion one particular framework. For instance, [West and Zimmerman \(1987: 127\)](#) portray gender as ‘managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category’. Meanwhile, studies on masculinities and femininities in Africa typically allude to both (e.g. [Adomako et al., 2009](#)). Similarly, [Ridgeway \(2011\)](#) adopts a multi-level framework, for they are not mutually exclusive. [Risman and Davis \(2013: 14–15\)](#) follow suit but also call for an investigation into their relative significance:

When does an individual choice of gendered options reflect internalised femininity or masculinity, and when do the expectational pressures of others prevail? ... When are gendered choices the only ones even imagined?

As noted by [England \(2005\)](#), there is a paucity of evidence confirming one view or the other. Studying the effectiveness of gender sensitisation might provide important insights. For example, an awareness-raising activity may lead someone to question their internalised stereotypes yet not undermine cultural expectations prevailing in society more broadly. If the individual subsequently adopts different practices, it would appear due to a revision of their own gender beliefs.

This initial rationale for investigating sensitisation was somewhat complicated by my subsequent recrafting of ‘cultural expectations’. While other theorists generally conceptualise these as properties of a given *society*, this paper focuses on *individuals’* presumptions about cultural expectations. This modification is important since cultural expectations only become causally efficacious through an individual’s presumptions about them, as learnt through experience. Both these presumptions and internalised stereotypes are thus understood to motivate sex-differentiated practices in the same way: through individuals’ beliefs. This contrasts with widely-used schemas that view them as operating at separate levels: individual and interactional ([Risman and Davis, 2013](#)).

Although internalised stereotypes and presumptions about cultural expectations operate in the same way, my analysis of sensitisation will show that sometimes they can be separated empirically. Making this distinction enables us to ascertain their relative significance.

My modification of ‘cultural expectations’ also has implications for theorising how gender is undone. [Deutsch \(2007: 107\)](#) argues that ‘whereas socialisation theories assume that individuals internalise the gendered norms that were salient when they were growing up, the doing gender model assumes that people respond to changing contemporary norms... [This] points to the possibility of revolutionary change within a much shorter time span’. But how do norms (or ‘cultural expectations’) change? If conformity with gender stereotypes is motivated by concerns about others’ likely responses then deviance requires confidence in their acceptance of alternatives. But how do people come to think that others have rejected gender stereotypes, such that it is safe to deviate from them? By investigating the impact of exposure to abstract messages of equality, this paper seeks to provide insights into what counts as disconfirming evidence of presumptions about cultural expectations.

Studies of gender sensitisation typically use quantitative methods to examine the effectiveness of specific interventions – many of which appear transformative. Systematic reviews of gender sensitisation with men find that participatory interventions have fostered self-reported gender egalitarian beliefs and reduced rates of gender-based violence in a range of both low and high income countries ([Barker et al., 2010](#); [Dworkin et al., 2013b](#)). In South Africa, [Dworkin et al. \(2013a\)](#) found that sensitised men became more inclined to express support for gender equality, joint decision-making and shared care work. Although these studies show that sensitisation can be transformative, further literature raises two important empirical questions: which forms of sensitisation are most effective; and why are some participants more persuaded than others? These research questions will be discussed in turn.

Some forms of sensitisation seem largely ineffectual. For instance, although ‘the topic of gender’ is said to have become ‘omnipresent’ in Zambian government and NGO offices ([Simpson, 2007: 185](#)), this does not appear to have been sufficient for attitudinal change. [Wendoh and Wallace \(2005\)](#) argue that gender sensitisation in Zambia is typically constrained by the standardised nature of the quick, one day trainings – arguably too brief for participants to analyse their situations, identify their own needs and ‘develop ownership of the concepts’.

Additional concerns have been raised about prevalent forms of sensitisation in Africa. Gender sensitisation is said to be increasingly widespread but typically depoliticised (not challenging power inequalities); just incorporated as the default gender element to fulfil donor requirements ([Ahikire, 2007](#); [Wendoh and Wallace, 2005](#)); yet with little funding allocated for institutional needs’ assessments or evaluation ([Tsikata, 2001](#)); sometimes facilitated by those not committed to gender equality ([Wendoh and Wallace, 2005](#)); and often presuming that women’s paucity in leadership is due to their gendered self-perceptions: that ‘women themselves are lacking in some way... They are not confident enough! [and hence require leadership training]’ ([Longwe, 2000, 24](#)).

[Wendoh and Wallace’s \(2005\)](#) implicit commendation of more *participatory* gender sensitisation is supported by research on the success of the organisation *Promundo* in transforming gender norms in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Here, [Barker et al. \(2011: 175\)](#) emphasise its creation of ‘a safe space in which young men can question traditional views about manhood and critically reflect on gender, gender injustices and gender rigidities’. Without this non-judgemental context, participants might have been reluctant to articulate, let alone explore alternative ideologies. Moreover, by doing so collectively and seeing others endorse gender egalitarian beliefs, they may have gained confidence in the objective validity of such views. My analysis similarly points to the importance of participatory gender sensitisation, and uses this empirical finding to contribute to broader theoretical debates about how gender is undone, i.e. what counts as disconfirming evidence of gender beliefs.

My second empirical question is why some participants are more persuaded than others. In rural Zambia, [Frischmuth \(1998\)](#) found that some sensitised women became more vocal in public meetings and were increasingly supported by men, while other women remained resistant to the egalitarian messages presented. Individual variation is also recorded by [Wendoh and Wallace \(2005: 74–75, 78\)](#). Drawing on research from Zambia, Uganda, The Gambia and Rwanda, they note that although discourses of equality are typically perceived as ‘foreign’ and ‘deeply threatening’, educated urban women ‘responded positively to concepts coming from Beijing... Those more able to embrace the ideas tended to be those with more economic options’. Might fall-back position also account for the variation amongst women recorded

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