

BOOK REVIEW

Cori Wielenga. *African Feminisms and Women in the Context of Justice in Southern Africa*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022. v + 117 pp. Index. \$149.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-3030821272.

Cori Wielenga's edited volume, *African Feminisms and Women in the Context of Justice in Southern Africa*, provides detailed accounts of women's roles in "justice on the ground" in several contexts across Southern Africa. The book very clearly frames what it is and what it is not; it is focused on providing thoughtful descriptions of women's roles in these justice systems. It is not meant to be overly theoretical, but rather to illustrate, by way of description, the complex, nuanced, and important roles women play in these systems. Wielenga lays out the reasoning for this approach: most of the works by Western researchers that focus on women and what others may refer to as "traditional" or "non-state" justice tend to prioritize "questions of inclusivity, gender justice, and human rights" (vi), while remaining distant from on-the-ground dynamics. This book highlights those on-the-ground processes, without a Western, neocolonial gaze.

Through a close examination of "on the ground justice," this book emphasizes women's unique and often overlooked role in justice processes. In these chapters, the authors make clear that even if women do not always hold the seemingly most powerful roles as chiefs or mediators (although sometimes they do), they nevertheless play a crucial role in the provision of justice. Two important themes emerged from the volume: the diversity of ways in which women influence "justice on the ground" and women's prioritization of relational dynamics of justice. I will address each in turn.

First, Wielenga's volume helps "reveal the complex and organic ways in which women have power and influence in relation to justice on the ground which may not be immediately obvious" (21). These roles can be as diverse as older female family members, such as aunts, serving as first points of conflict resolution (Matsimbe, Murambadoro), as well as women serving as community court messengers, secretaries, or assessors (Bae et al.), chiefs of ten households or blocks, and doing conflict resolution in churches and social affairs groups (Matsimbe). These roles can be more or less "official," but their impact on resolving disputes and supporting the community is reflected in all

examples. While there may be barriers to women's impact in these roles, such as men not taking their input seriously (Matsimbe), they generally emerge as both relevant and recognized.

Second, the authors highlight women's role in promoting family and community harmony and coherence, sometimes above individualistic notions of justice. These descriptions of women's roles in practice challenge some of the simplistic accounts of gender inequality in these fora and emphasize the relational character of justice in these settings, and potentially beyond. The chapter by Bosco Bae et al., for example, explores how women in Okombahe, Namibia, address conflicts involving men while considering the impact or implications that punishment may have on the family, not just the individual. Notably, women may even "choose to endure domestic abuse for the survival of their family and community. Were a man to be prosecuted for domestic violence, it would potentially mean the loss of the breadwinner of the household, placing the woman and her children in an even more precarious position" (35). Although these are difficult decisions, several chapters emphasize women's agency in maintaining the community and family. At the same time, the volume is balanced and recognizes barriers to justice for women on the ground, such as in the case of the ambiguous standing of *lobolo* in the dissolution of marriages (Stofile & Mpya).

Importantly, the research presented in this volume works to de-center the state and Western feminist assumptions of women's experiences of non-state justice through close and in-depth knowledge of "justice on the ground." Wielenga points out that Western feminisms have dominated academic engagements and argues for more contextualized understandings of justice. This volume thus provides a strong foundation for future research directions. First, it serves as a starting point for deeper exploration of the complexity of women's decisions to prioritize family and community harmony together over removing themselves from the possibility of future violence. Second, further consideration of women as agents in the construction, maintenance, and reconstruction of the dynamics of legal pluralism and legality based on grounded research would certainly be a welcome addition to the scholarly theorizing around gender justice.

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