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Book Review

Women and fairness: Navigating an unfair world, edited by Eva Lambertsson Björk, Jutta Eschenbach, and Johanna M. Wagner

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Mathabo Khau, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

Mathabo.khau@mandela.ac.za

The book, *Women and Fairness: Navigating an Unfair World*, comes at an opportune time when the world needs to rethink its stance towards gender equality and the equitable treatment of all who inhabit it. The history of humanity shows that gender inequity has existed since time immemorial, with different societies privileging one gender over another. The advent of the Covid-19 coronavirus escalated inequalities in communities in terms of the haves and the have-nots regarding access to health services, livelihoods, and education. According to the John Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Centre (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>), by April 2022, more than six million people had lost their lives due to the virus, with millions more having lost their jobs. Studies conducted during the period of the pandemic have highlighted that unemployment and heavy care work were negatively skewed towards women. The incidence of gender-based violence reached record highs within a short space of time, showing that our societies are active volcanoes waiting to erupt.

Women from all walks of life have had their agency challenged, their voices silenced, and their capabilities inhibited while trying to perform their duties or take a stand against unjust systems in the public domain. The overt and covert shaming, blaming, and silencing of women trying to make the world a better place for all occur within patriarchal institutions in the public and private domains. Families, churches, schools, workplaces, and governments privilege hegemonic masculinities while everything feminine is belittled and sidelined. The hegemonic heteropatriarchal gender order of many communities, therefore, requires a rethinking in this day and age when life systems are drastically changing and the gender divide in skills and careers has been reduced. Thus, the onus is on those who can, to take up arms and remind the world of their daily struggles in overcoming the barriers to full recognition as human beings.

This book presents stories of feminist academics who are trying to reintroduce women's intellectual work into various academic disciplines to unearth the expansive and inclusive visions of what women can become and achieve in a truly free world. It is a collection of works that speaks to women's experiences and places them at the centre of scholarly debate. The chapters are based on first-hand testimonies of real women about their experiences, fictional women's experiences, and studies about women's experiences as imperative tools of self-empowerment in a discernibly unfair world. Its

purpose is to highlight women's contributions as subjects and creators of life and culture, thus opening alleyways that were once obstructed by misogyny and sexism.

Despite this lofty aim, the chapters show that women are still facing the challenges of silencing and invisibility, with multitudes of barriers placed in their paths. In the chapters, women scholars from different disciplines ask important questions regarding the many obstacles placed before them. They use their voices to narrate stories of women who fight, ignore, or succumb to these obstacles and how womanhood is constructed in different societies. Although women constitute more than 50 per cent of the world's population, they are the ones who are oppressed and must face several hurdles in their daily lives. This implies that the majority is being subordinated by the minority in unfair dealings supported by state and institutions. The collection of chapters in this book highlights the unfairness of such oppression and hindrances placed in women's career and livelihood paths and societal participation. Thus, it is hoped that those who read this book will gain a revitalised sense of urgency to revisit the unique barriers placed before women as they manoeuvre their paths in life.

The first part of the book explores women in fictional texts and their struggles in making life choices regarding their personal identities and work. The chapters draw attention to the normalised systemic inequality between women and men leading to economic disparity and a cult of domesticity. One of the chapters (by Guri Ellen Barstad) explores women's rights as artists and encourages female artistic power in a world in which good womanhood consists of women who keep silent about their artistic ambitions. Another chapter (Jane Ekstam's, "Looking and Feeling Good on My Own Terms") explores women's struggles with prejudice associated with their multiple identities. Religion and culture are placed at the forefront of prejudicial actions against women in different contexts and spaces, making them feel unwelcome and alien.

The second part of the book probes the various ways in which women are represented in cultural productions such as comics, film, and literature. It evaluates the stereotypes of concepts such as gender and identity in comics through the reflections of theorists such as Sarah Brabant, Linda Mooney, and Fabio Parasecoli. In a chapter by Johanna M. Wagner ("Sublimity of the New Mother in Gothic Film") women's portrayal in film as mothers shows the inequitable depictions of angelic characters of good mothers and evil characters of bad mothers, and attempts to balance images of the mother on screen with the sacred expectations of that image in people's minds and lives. Moving into fiction, we find Melanie Duckworth's chapter ("Women, Animals and Fairness") that draws on two texts to argue that together, the novels expose and resist an unfair hierarchy that assumes that women, animals, and the natural world are inferior to men. By interrogating and reimagining metaphorical relationships between women and animals, the novels attempt to dismantle the restrictive binaries between culture and nature, human and animal, male and female. Turning to translation studies, Marcus Axelsson uses a coupled-pairs analysis—a traditional method in which source text excerpts are matched with their translated counterparts—to explicate the various visual and textual elements of the translations in order to find the ways in which the translations encourage or discourage gendered readings of the protagonist. The chapter concentrates on passages containing misogynistic remarks, the objectification of women, and the crossing of gender barriers to find whether the translated texts move closer to, or further from, the source text's gendered excerpts.

The last and third part of the book presents a nonfictional world in which women navigate contemporary life while relating their stories or telling the stories of others. The first chapter in this section (Deanna Benjamin's, "Writing Someone Else's Story") focuses on the fact that women's stories have historically been exploited by others or silenced. It asks the question: "Who has the right to tell another's story?" According to the author, acceptable storytelling depends on the storyteller, the listener, and what happened. She argues that only when the teller is also a participant in the story

(whether as a primary actor or as a bystander) is she permitted to tell the story. The chapter continues with another question: “What happens when someone who is not a participant in the original story becomes a participant in the retelling or silencing of the story?” It examines the rights of storytelling, the rights of the one who tells the story of another, and the reasons for and effects of silence in consideration of the storyteller and the one about whom the story is told.

The next chapter (by Rania Maktabi) studies the movement of women’s rights in three states— Morocco, Lebanon, and Kuwait—that did not experience war in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab revolts. It discusses the role of the Arab Spring in the rejuvenation of strengthened protection of women against all forms of violence. The author discusses the strengthening of female citizenship in these states as an issue of public concern in need of the state’s involvement in protecting women through new social welfare schemes, female police officers, and the first-time entry of female prosecutors in courts after 2014.

Through individual interviews, the authors of the next chapter (Eva Lambertsson Björk and Jutta Eschenbach) trace how four African women have contested and navigated patriarchal power structures on their way to tenured academic positions in South Africa. Further, they consider how these narratives bear testimony to a change in their identities within the boundaries of “African woman,” a social positioning that is brought explicitly into the discussion by one of their interviewees. The four interviewees give testimony to how rigid patriarchal structures have influenced their lives. However, their narratives also show that it is possible to defy, in some ways, the allotted gender roles of African women.

The book ends with an autoethnographic telling of a personal story by Mathabo Khau (“Being and Becoming a Woman in Lesotho”). This chapter highlights some of the challenges that women and girls meet in trying to find a sense of belonging in different communities. It discusses how a Mosotho woman’s experiences of girlhood and womanhood have affected her identity construction and sense of belonging as a sister, wife, mother, and teacher educator. Women and girls’ sense of belonging is an important factor in their equal participation in all spheres of life. However, many women and girls worldwide still face challenges to participating fully in creating an inclusive world because of the lack of supportive structures such as access to quality basic and higher education and full autonomy. While advances are being made to address issues of gender inequality worldwide, first-person accounts of women’s experiences of belonging in communities with a patriarchal gender order remain scarce, especially from the Global South.

If you have not read this book, now is the time to get yourself a copy. You might find resonances with your own lived experiences and storied life and appreciate the fact that you do have a story worth telling. All experiences are worth telling, and it is in the telling and retelling that we learn what worked and what has not served us in our journey of life. While we may not have similar experiences in life, we may be motivated by learning about other people’s struggles and achievements such that we have the necessary tools for our own lives. This book is a necessity for students, academics, researchers, advocacy, and activist groups interested in gender equality and women’s studies. It provides a refreshing insight into how women navigate their life paths in an unfair world.