Conference Explores Women’s Experiences with Law in Africa

From March 31 to April 1, scholars from diverse disciplinary perspectives—anthropology, communications and culture, folklore, law, linguistics, political science, and women’s studies—presented research exploring women’s experiences with the law and legal systems in Africa. The conference, Women, Language, and Law in Africa, was organized by Beverly Stoeltje (Communication and Culture, IUB) and supported by the African Studies Program at IU Bloomington.

While studies have long looked at how people pursue their objectives through African legal systems, where much of legal anthropology was developed, particularly on South Africa, they have largely ignored women. Within the past three years, however, books by scholars like Anne Griffiths (University of Texas at Austin) and Susan Hirsch (Wesleyan University), who both participated in the conference, have begun to redress this imbalance. The goal of the conference was to examine how African women use the legal systems in their own societies and to understand the role of language in legal matters that help or hinder them in conflict situations and in the pursuit of their goals.

In the first panel, Akin Ibidapo-Obe (University of Lagos, Nigeria) and Marie Umeh (CUNY) spoke of women caught in the crosscurrents of customary versus contemporary law regarding marriage, and whether such legal documents as wills could protect widows from more customary traditions of distribution of their husbands’ wealth and property. Jane Goodman (IUB) looked at how Algerian rural women’s traditional folksongs were being copyrighted and commercialized. Gracia Clark (IUB) brought up the ambiguous status of women market traders in relation to such legal matters as taxation, rental contracts, and land use rights.

In the panel on legal disputes, Lynn Khadiagala spoke of the need to protect the property rights of Ugandan women who are increasingly contributing to economic growth. Two papers by Anne Griffiths and Laurel Rose (Carnegie Mellon University) addressed the resistance to change in customary law regarding land disputes and the limited access to avenues of appeal by women. A paper on the plight of refugee women as victims in situations of war and ethnic violence, by Loveness Schafer (formerly with UNHCR for Refugees), pointed out how the language of regulations defining refugee status failed to include gender issues such as rape and sexual abuse.

The final panel, with papers by Dorothy Hodgson (Rutgers University), Linda Semu (IUB), Susan Hirsch, Beverly Stoeltje and Samuel Obeng (IUB) ranged over issues such as women’s rights as human rights, cultural and legal redefinitions of women’s studies, language and gender in law reform campaigns, and women’s voices in African legal systems. Discussants for the plenary talk and each panel were IU faculty Carol Greenhouse (Communication and Culture), Kathryn Firmin-Sellers (Political Science), Lauren Robel (Law), and Susan Williams (Law).

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