

## CROSSING BORDERS, (RE)SHAPING GENDER. MUSIC AND GENDER IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

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**Abstract:** Music is known to be one of the most visible forms of artistic expression through which traditional patriarchal values in society can be contested and challenged. However, it has not been recognised to what extent globalisation has enhanced or hindered the use of music as a tool for gender equality. Therefore, it is necessary to find linkages between gender and music in globalisation processes. Based on case studies, this paper will illustrate how music has changed or perpetuated traditional social relations within societies and how this was only possible due to an increasing exchange of cultural, economic and social values, and ideas.

**Keywords:** gender, music, globalisation, transnationalism, empowerment.

Communication is essential to the human creature, as she has evolved in our world. But that communication itself evolved under conditions structured by inequality and domination

Cubitt (1997: 296)

The power of music as a platform for social change is undeniable. As deep structural and technological changes in society have reshaped livelihoods, music has been the 'soundtrack' for many of these changes (Moisala and Diamond, 2000). For instance, in the 1970s in the United States, adult musicals portrayed the "country's rapidly changing, often contradictory, attitudes about gender and sexuality at a time when the sexual revolution had given way to the gay and women's liberation movements" (Wollman, 2008: 6). Therefore, music has the potential to act as a medium through which gender relations are negotiated and (re)articulated. However, if the relationship between music and gender has been previously documented, it has been done numerous times without proper contextualisation within globalisation processes. This means, as Samuel Dwinell (2009)

pointed out, that there has not been any debate about the relationship between gender, music and globalisation. So far, only gender and music; music and globalisation; and gender and globalisation relationships have been explored, albeit separately. Hence, if “music [...] functions as a vehicle for mediating ideas and experiences about modernity and its crisis”, it is pertinent to find out how globalisation may allow or disallow music to articulate or rearticulate gender relations (Lukalo, 2008: 259). Thus, this paper aims to link issues of gender, music and globalisation. It aims to explore how gender relations are negotiated through music in globalising processes. Finally, it also aims to understand the roles performed by the different actors involved in the process.

This will be done by, firstly, presenting Boaventura de Sousa Santos' views on globalisation, their implications and the two main modes of production of globalisation. This will help in the discussion of how music and gender are inherently linked to processes of globalisation and how the outcomes of this linkage are multiple. Secondly, this paper will explore the globalisation of music and how, at a macro-level, it has a direct impact on gender relations. It will be of relevance in this section to look at the consequences of the profit-oriented marketing in the music industry. The third section will, conversely, focus on impact of globalisation at the micro-level. With the aid of Ellen Koskoff's theories regarding the relationship between gender and music, it will be analysed how this relationship is embedded within globalising processes. Finally, the last section will offer some concluding remarks.

There is the need to move beyond the restrictive space of a single nation when studying cultural phenomena. Nations are no longer isolated fragments in the world map. Lisa Malkki asserted that the world is no longer “composed of sovereign, spatially discontinuous units”; it is a misconception to assume the global space as “like any school atlas with yellow, green, pink, orange, and blue countries composing a truly global map with no vague or ‘fuzzy spaces’ and no bleeding boundaries” (Malkki, 1992: 26). Hence, specific demarcated spaces are now porous and allow for both the externalisation and internalisation of economic, human and cultural capital. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) defined these processes as a “set of unequal exchanges in which a certain artefact, condition, entity or local identity extends its influence beyond its national borders” (p. 396). Santos argues that these processes have two main implications. The first one is that globalisation is a result of a specific localism. In other words, the global is always linked to a particular condition, experience and, most importantly, to a specific location. For instance, although Rock'n'Roll is currently a global music genre, it has its origins rooted in the United States. The second implication is that the concept of globalisation creates two distinct spheres: the superior and dominant (global) and, in opposition, the dominated and inferior (local). This is visible in global music markets as they are now

dominated by music produced in the Western world. This diffusion of Anglo-American music was only possible due to revolutionary developments in information and communication systems that have transformed the world.

One of the most visible transformations is the compression of time and space that has facilitated the current exchange of economic, social and cultural capital. However, as Santos noted, these exchanges are of a multidimensional nature. This is because there are different actors with different interests involved and there are clearly winners and losers. Despite many nations and people being involved in the globalising process there are only a few, “the global capitalist class” in the developed world, that are able to reap the benefits (Santos, 2006: 396). These are the ones with the resources and mobility to actually control the process. Proof of that is that the four biggest music corporations are all located in the rich industrialised countries and in being so they are not only able to promote their own artists but they also have the resources to market it at a global scale. However, the impact of Western music on gender relations is felt differently in different parts of the world. Arguments that revolve around the idea that cultural items are usually imposed in societies and accepted in its crudest form are flawed. For example, globally marketed versions of femininity in music are not a simple process of imposition and assimilation (Kirmse 2010; Kehily and Nayak, 2008). Femininity, or gender identity, is here regarded as a set of characteristics and behaviours that are socially and culturally constructed and associated to one’s biological sex; in this case to women. Stereotypically, and in contrast to the opposite sex, women are regarded as passive, emotional, warm, submissive and cooperative. Another version of femininity present in the music industry is the case of female artists such as Madonna or Britney Spears, portrayed as independent, sexualised, bold, and ambitious women. Yet, both versions of femininity are often not mimicked by their respective audiences. In fact, young women “appropriate, adapt and subvert” meanings contained in music thus, creating their own feminine identity (Kehily and Nayak, 2008: 339). It is important then to distinguish the two main modes of production of globalisation as described by Santos: ‘globalised localism’ and ‘localised globalism’. In the case under analysis, ‘globalised localism’ refers to the globalisation of specific musical genres; and ‘localised globalism’ refers to local reaction, adaptation, or resistance to globalised localism.

Music, as a globalised localism, has had a casual effect on gender relations. Martin Stokes (2004) concluded that the globalisation of music has maintained hegemonic racial and gendered hierarchies. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, the forces of the market are unbalanced. That is, Western music is able to infiltrate and dominate in the developing world while the opposite is less likely to happen. Secondly, the vast majority of musicians performing today are men. Even some musical genres originally performed

solely by women, such as Raï in Algeria, have now men as leading artists. Thirdly, musical cultures are compared to one another and ranked according to their origin. Thus, Western music is considered of more importance to multinational music companies and to audiences than, for instance, World Music. As a consequence, some cross-cultural musical styles are extremely commodified and favoured, such as the Anglo-Saxon/Latin. Others are marginalised and not equally distributed, such as the African/Latin ones (Stokes, 2004). Finally, the globalisation of music by Latin female artists, especially in its visual form, has only exacerbated the sexualisation of Latin women. In Denmark, the explosion of Latin music videos from artists such as Shakira, Beyonce or Jennifer Lopez has sexualised the Latin female body (Lundström, 2009). This is because, unlike any other promotional device, the images in a music video “after repeated viewing” become more relevant than the song (Hawkins and Richardson, 2007: 606). As a consequence the Latin female in the diaspora became immediately stereotyped as hot and exotic. Although they were Danish citizens they were primarily regarded as Latin women instead of Danish subjects.

Another globalised localism that has had an impact on gender is the case of Hip-hop. Hip-hop began as a pacifist artistic and musical movement against racism in the United States. It shares with other musical styles, such as punk, the attitude of “detachment, and of some degree of opposition to mainstream, polite, co-opted society” (Brooks and Conroy, 2011: 5). With time, it has suffered the influence of the markets to become a distinct form of expression. Now, it is often associated with misogynistic and violent values that are massively consumed by global audiences (Loots, 2003; Giovanetti, 2003; Schneider, 2011; Shonekan, 2011). Like so many American products it became a “part of our everyday lives” (Haupt, 2003: 22). Although, it still contains some of the original messages of class, race and gender struggle, Liane Loots (2003) argued that “the globalisation of struggles has often rendered the specifics of race, gender and class struggles in the South silent” (Loots, 2003: 67). Evidently, gender struggles in the North differ greatly from gender struggles in the South. In South Africa, for instance, the dominance of American hip-hop in the market has devaluated its native forms and diluted its local messages of struggle.

Not only are South Africans consuming foreign music but also assimilating cultural values that rest on misogynistic gender divisions. Typical images of hip-hop display males with guns fighting for prestige and wealth; they also portray women as their sexual objects, usually referred to as “bitches” and “whores” (*ibidem*). Thus, the consumption of foreign sexist and capitalist musical forms may prevent native musical forms from flourishing and renders it difficult for local artists to address real societal problems, in particular the ones related to gender.

Globalised localisms will obviously create localised globalisms which are the second mode of production of globalisation. The impact that music has on gender relations on a specific location, and how the latter adapts to it, is then a globalised localism. This impact may take different forms. Ellen Koskoff's study (1987) helps to explain how music can influence gender relations in four different ways: it may reinforce the established gender division; it may maintain the established order so that more important values in society are upheld; it can contest the established order but it is unable to change the gender hierarchy; and finally it can serve as a platform for gender equality and empowerment. These four forms of localised globalism will now be explored and illustrated with the aid of case studies.

Through music it is possible to re-enact social constructions regarding gender behaviours and roles and maintain traditions. Hence, music can reinforce and perpetuate the traditional gender hierarchy. The globalisation of world music markets and its profit-oriented mechanisms has led to the commodification of the 'gendered otherness'. 'Otherness' is a symbol for an exotic, distant culture or people which is commodified to sell to the Western world. *The 12 Girls Band*, from China, is an example of this. Critics of the band claim that the marketing strategy is not based on their musical proficiency but around the sexualisation of their body. This is because "fans around the world have regularly been as or more impressed by the Girls themselves than by the music they play" (Yang and Saffle, 2010: 95). This image is reinforced by the Chinese name of the band which is 'yuefang'. This name is strongly related with geishas that, during the Tang Dynasty, served as entertainers to men. Therefore, critics have pointed out that, similarly to the geishas, the 12 Girls Band rely on their visual attractiveness to reap monetary benefits. In terms of gender relations, it suggests that the sexualisation of the body is a form of "submission to patriarchal authority" (*ibidem*: 97). The globalisation of music markets has feminised sexual performance to the point that aesthetics become more important than music. As Yang and Saffle concluded, "[w]hen a subservient culture wants to export its artistic products to a dominant culture, it has to adjust its product to meet dominant value systems and aesthetic preferences" (*ibidem*, 2010: 104).

Thus, female pop artists in Japan tend to act and perform according to a certain type of feminine cuteness; Ian Condry named it as "cutismo" (Condry, 2006: 170). Condry questioned whether this 'cutismo' could act as a form of empowerment for women. As he explains "cute means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and appearances" (*ibidem*: 170). Therefore, Japanese young women not only idolise cute but also want to become cute. This is because "music, like Pepsi, uses [...] image to arouse [...] longings and to present us with a particular kind of consumption as the means of satisfying them"

(Walser, 1993: 126). As a result, instead of investing in their intellectual capabilities, girls and young women build their strength in being weak and relying on their looks.

This is also the case in Mali where female artists gain respect and attention, nationally and internationally, by using a mixture of local musical traditions with aesthetics according to Western standards (Schulz, 2002). These case studies have shown that the localised globalism have assimilated and adapted to the globalised localism. In other words, outside influences such as Western music, videos have been not only accepted but also reproduced. However, there are also cases where there has been resistance to globalised localisms.

When music is a threat to established cultural norms and values, the localised globalism will react and resist indigenisation as a way of maintaining the established gender division. Because music is inherently linked to culture, then, by maintaining the gender roles and consequently the social order, cultural values and national ideals are perpetuated. In the People's Republic of China, satellite TV has brought music videos containing images of the Western female sexualised body to its closed nationalistic media circuit. Music videos aired on China's Channel V, broadcast a wide range of styles from very different locations. It is possible to see North American hip-hop, Taiwanese rap or even Irish alternative music in succession. The conflation of different messages on music videos on TV has brought the Chinese identity into question. The continuous exposure to images portrayed in the videos has led Chinese young women to question their role in society; as everywhere, "a lot of teenagers define themselves or who they are by the images the media portray" (Erfort and Amansure, 2003: 31).

In China, in particular, women have been historically associated with maternal roles; with the responsibility of carrying the nation's future in their bodies. Therefore, the hyper-sexualised subjectivity present in videos from Western cultures has not only been seen as threat to traditional cultural practices but also as a threat to national identity. In this sense, female sexuality is seen as a threat to a society's "health, purity, and vigour" (Bannister 2010: 168). Nancy Love added that if 'nation and race are understood in terms of family, then control of women's sexuality [...] becomes extremely important to maintain a racialized – and purified – state" (Love, 2009: 19). Hence, the globalised and 'impure' female Western body challenged the state's power to control the national gendered body. In order to reaffirm national identity, the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television limited the broadcast of Western music videos. According to Lisa Parks (2002) this limitation results in "constraining the representations of femininity" (Parks, 2002: 219). Thus, she suggests that the feminine is often a barometer from which it is possible to deduce how far a culture has been influenced by Western paradigms.



When a localised globalism is characterised by resistance to its global counterpart there are ways in which gender issues are still negotiated through music. In this way artists resort to music which convey hidden messages that are not directly understood by the hegemonic force. However, as the messages are hidden, they are unable to make a relevant impact and therefore are unable to change the foundations of the gender division. A case in point regards the Malian feminist-singer Oumou Sangaré. She is one of the most popular singers in Mali and gained international reputation due to her feminist critique of Mali's patriarchal society. According to Heather Maxwell (2003), her songs are about common challenges that youth and women face in contemporary urban life; in finding a balance between wanting and demanding individual freedom of choice. "[...] Arranged (and often forced) marriage, polygamy, and female submission to male authority and abuse are common themes in her songs" (Maxwell, 2003: 44).

Thus, Sangaré in her songs protests against the social order and contests the oppressive gender relations. However, she is only understood that way by her international audiences. In Mali, Sangaré is considered as a simple wedding singer. Wedding songs in Mali usually contain advice to young single women about "how to be good wives and women" (*ibidem*: 45). Sangaré, cunningly, uses both traditional and cosmopolitan sound and text to critique the social order without overtly stating it. To the Malian patriarchal hegemony she seems to be singing traditional wedding songs, when in fact she is addressing messages of contestation of gender roles to girls and young women. As Koskoff explains,

the [...] use of such strategies of protest, disguise, or gender transformation in many diverse social/music settings points to one of the most interesting social processes that occurs cross-culturally, namely that of social deception – the seeming contradictions that result from what people say they are doing (real behaviour), what they appear to be doing (apparent behaviour) and what they are actually doing (real behaviour). (1987: 12-13)

Maxwell also noted that this was only possible due to globalising processes such as developments in technology and in global markets.

In terms of technology, the use of radio and television has helped Sangaré to spread further and faster not only her music but, more importantly, her feminist critique to a wider audience. The expansion of Sangaré's music to global markets resulted in her songs being understood differently by different audiences. That is, while in Mali, she is acknowledged as popular wedding singer, in West Africa she symbolises an independent and free woman, and in the United States she is known as a feminist champion. As

Maxwell concluded, it is not so much about changing the social order. Maxwell suggests that what is important to remember is that, through music, Sangaré has brought the traditional private submissive role of women into public discussion. In addition, it is through music that they are also able to establish themselves as economically and socially independent women. All in all, it was Western audiences (i.e. the global market) that 'created' Sangaré as a feminist. She took advantage of this connotation to advance her social and economic status. Despite this, her "global success is also an opportunity for singers to seize unprecedented power that has the potential to send them into leadership roles for social change. However, that remains to be seen in Mali" (Maxwell, 2003: 61).

Nonetheless, music can be used as a tool to challenge and threaten societies' constructions based on gender and consequently change it. In this category music contains open messages of criticism and directly attacks gender assumptions in society. The colonial city of Leopoldville, in Congo, is an example of how music was a platform to tackle gender inequalities. Didier Gondola described how music in Congo during colonial times became a "medium for gender negotiation" (Gondola, 1997: 65). In 1928, women were not allowed in the urbanised cities. They were confined to rural activities by both the colonisers and their male counterparts. In addition, the colonisers viewed Congolese men as having the potential to become civilised while women were constantly ostracised. Women were also denied social and economic opportunities such as employment and education in the city. At that time, prostitution was the only way for women to enter and remain in the city. However, due to developments in Congolese popular music, women found a way to balance the inequality in gender relations.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the colonial powers were more lenient in allowing women in Leopoldville. This concession made possible for women to embrace music as a form of protest against their oppressors. Their music mobilised more women to engage with their struggle without the risk of punishment as native forms of music were not under colonial control; Congolese women would sing in Lingala rather than French. Gradually, women became owners of small and illegal social clubs to where men would go in adulation to their performances and their bodies. Their musical performances changed the gender balance in three ways. First, music was no longer exclusively performed by Congolese and European men. Second, Congolese women were able to have multiple partners; a practice that was illegal to them at the time. They took this as an opportunity to create competition between possible suitors and therefore advance their social and economic status. Finally, they reversed the configuration of domestic and public domains:

Daytime society remained a male arena while evening society, which can be considered as the public space, was dominated by women. In bars married men



who wore the pants in their household became subject to women's rules. Thus, women who were living in a daytime society in which they had no say lorded it over men in bars at night. (Gondola, 1997: 76)

Through music, Congolese women rearticulated their own position in a patriarchal society where they were subordinate to both the colonial powers and Congolese men. Despite acknowledging their status, Congolese women did not accept the gendered form of rule imposed on them by the European colonisers. They chose a native cultural form of expression – one that was not controlled by the colonial powers – and recreated and reshaped gender relations (*ibidem*).

This paper has shown that there is a linkage between globalisation, music and gender. The spread and reach of cultural globalisation has taken new ideas and new images to the majority of the globe. The capacity that multinational corporations have to market these ideas and images and reproduce them either digitally or physically in distant cultures has reduced significantly traditional barriers such as time and space. Such a dramatic increase in volume of cultural exchange was surely going to have an impact on the social realm of societies. Therefore, this exchange has led to two different modes of production of globalisation. On the one hand, there is the globalisation of music (the globalised localism); and on the other there is the impact it causes such as assimilation, resistance or adaptation by societies (the localised globalism). At the macro-level, controlling the globalised localism of music, the main actors are the multinational corporations in charge of the distribution of music. The tendency is for these to distort meanings of music genres and sexualise even further, especially in music videos, the female body in order to suit a uniform global audience. This suggests that the globalised music is gendered at its very core and as a consequence its racial, gender and class values are mirrored at the local level. At the micro-level, there are a larger variety of actors either resisting or recreating the globalised localism. Nonetheless, whatever the form the localised globalism takes, as the case studies have shown, they have negative repercussions in gender relations. The majority of the cases show that the localised globalisms have not resulted in the empowerment of women. On the contrary, they perpetuate gender hierarchies by reinforcing the linkage between women and body instead of promoting the linkage between women and subjectivity. A further conclusion is that although music is able to bring into public discussion issues of gender inequalities, there are usually actors who have the power to control its impact as the Chinese case study has shown. This means that gender emancipation will depend on how much the rich capitalist class, at the global level, or the ruling class, at the local level, are willing to change their views on gender. Music could be a powerful vehicle for change in gender

relations, as it was in colonial Congo, but in a globalised world one could argue that it is being rather misused.

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