

Gender Research and Policy Dialogue in Africa: Towards an Agenda for Further Interventions

A Reflection Note Prepared by CODESRIA¹

Introduction

A broad review of the post-independence terrain of knowledge production and policy-making in Africa will indicate that over the last four and half decades, significant progress has been made in the integration of gender both into the preoccupations of scholars and national and regional policy-making. In the early decades of independence, gender as an analytic category and policy tool hardly featured on the African landscape, and when during the course of the 1970s into the early 1980s, it began gradually to emerge on the horizon, it was met with ambivalence, even outright resistance. A reading of the history of that period would suggest that the early post-independence period was one of a deafening, almost all-round gender *silence* in the social research community²; the subsequent period up to the end of the 1980s was marked by an ambivalence that soon translated into a conscious *resistance* of the entry of gender into the African intellectual and policy terrains³. But it was a resistance effort that was met with an equal determination by the emerging crop of African gender researchers, often doubling also as activists who were also eventually called upon to undertake direct and indirect policy roles within governments, in inter-governmental agencies and in non-governmental settings. It is thanks to the tenacity of purpose of these pioneers that the gender struggle was successfully waged to the point where today, only the most mischievous and/or ignorant of African intellectuals – as indeed any other intellectuals elsewhere in the world – would question the validity of gender as an analytic category or its utility for the framing of social, economic, cultural, environmental, political and other

¹ This note, produced as a general, stylised overview, is meant to feed into reflection on strategies for scaling up and deepening African gender research and, by implication, gender research on Africa. It has been deliberately made short for readability and to serve as a starting point for more extended consultations.

² Without exception, the mainstream social science disciplines were gender-blind both in the content of courses and in the conceptual tools around which they were structured. See the path-breaking collection entitled *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 1997) edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow. The main saving grace was to be found in the literary arts (drama and literature) where a number of significant authors attempted to engage gender themes.

³ See Ayesha Imam et al, 1997, *Ibid*.

policies. This, of course, is not to say that there are no serious internal debates – as, indeed, there should be – among gender researchers, activists and policy makers over content, context, direction, and strategy; such debates have been the stuff of which the extension of the frontiers of gender research/studies have been made. The debates, together with the enriched and changing terrain of gender research, activism, and policy-making also provide the broad context for the promotion of new interventions designed to advance the frontiers of knowledge and the deepen the sites of policy. This overview paper argues the case for such interventions, with specific proposals on measures and initiatives that might be pursued in ways which build on historic strengths, overcome historic weaknesses and tap new opportunities associated with the transformations going on in African and global gender studies and research broadly defined.

A Dynamic Era of Gender Research and Activism in Africa

If, as noted earlier, it is indeed the case that the first years of African independence was characterised by gender silences, it will be equally correct to argue that that outcome was equally paradoxical. The paradox lay in the fact that the nationalist independence struggle that unfolded in earnest across Africa after 1945 and which was underpinned by renascent pan-African ideals was galvanised by a growing intellectual social group – the so-called educated elites – who counted among their ranks frontline female activists. The contributions of these female activists took various forms, including especially the mobilisation of women behind the independence project through various acts of resistance to colonial policies and defiance against outrageous edicts⁴; these contributions gave a popular edge to the struggle and greater self-confidence to the nationalist leadership. By the same token, many a nationalist leader proclaimed the centrality of women’s role in the public space to their visions of a renascent Africa. In other words, the nationalist moment in recent African history was a gendered moment involving the mobilisation of male and female energies and concerns to achieve change. And yet, no sooner was independence achieved than the dissolution of the anti-colonial nationalist coalition translated into the assertion and reinforcement of patriarchal values within the inherited structures of power and knowledge that were then reproduced in ways which produced silences in research and policy. In the big debates that excited the growing scholarly community, including especially those that centred on the historiography of the continent and the efforts at the Africanisation of the curriculum and faculty, gender hardly featured as an issue of serious concern⁵.

⁴ Some of the more prominent among these women include Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Gambo Sawaba, Chibambo, etc.

⁵ The best that was done in the effort to rewrite the historiography of Africa was to tell the story of prominent pre-colonial female leaders like Queen Amina of Zazzau or recount the

Course offerings on gender studies were few and far between – and were on the margins of what was considered as “serious” academic engagement; as a tool of analysis, gender hardly featured in the research undertaken as class analysis competed with ethnicity for hegemony.

It was this generally unsatisfactory state of affairs concerning the status of gender in the academy that a second generation of African scholars began to confront in the course of the 1970s, drawing strength from the global emergence of a radical feminist project. The refraction of the campaigns of the global feminist movement into the African academy saw the gradual pile up of pressures first for the legitimation of gender as a scholarly concern and then the translation of that legitimacy into concrete programmatic initiatives designed to engender all aspects of the academy. In the frontline of this process was a crop of female intellectuals who had made their entry into the African research milieu – in most cases after their training overseas, very much like many of their male colleagues with whom they constituted the second generation of African social researchers. Predictably, their struggle for the engendering of the university system and the research agenda was met with stiff resistance: Old prejudices against gender and feminist activists were resurrected and freely, even opportunistically deployed against them; institutional rules were interpreted rigidly in order to foreclose any innovations favourable to gender; the ideology of gender as a proxy for a special pleading for female quotas was propagated – as if in the context of the human resource lopsidedness in the university, quota was itself a bad thing - and arguments were marshalled to suggest that gender was more a political tool, not a scientific one and, as such, had no place in the research world⁶.

In the face of the resistance which they faced, the emerging community of gender researchers, most of them women who counted just a sprinkling of men among them, had no choice than to pursue a multiple track approach: the tenacious prosecution of local struggles in different universities and countries for the recognition of gender, the launching of alternative local and regional platforms for networking around gender concerns, and the lobbying of local and regional policy establishments for the integration of gender concerns into governmental development planning. This was how gender research and activism came to interface in most countries and that interface was to be bolstered by developments on the global stage that required governments to prepare policy positions on how they would engender development and sign on to international conventions on gender. At the same time, the transformation of the boundaries of social research in Europe by the feminist revolution also fed

courageous the exploits of early female resisters of the colonial imposition like Saraounia and Nehanda.

⁶ See Ayesha Imam *et al*, 1997, *op cit*.

into this process. The outcome was the beginning of the flourishing of associational life – academic and non-academic - around gender issues across Africa, the emergence of gender study cells within the university system that all added up to produce the breakthrough that was registered during the 1980s in the form of the recognition within the academy that gender is, indeed, a valid scientific category and tool which ought to be incorporated into the curriculum. Gender research networks of various kinds also flourished, including the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AWWORD) which was founded as a pan-African network of organic intellectuals of the African gender movement, incubated within CODESRIA during its formative years and finally setting up its own independent offices in Dakar where it has been headquartered. The AWWORD example was to inspire other similar networks locally and regionally that are too well known to merit recounting here.

Today, thanks to the struggles that were waged during the 1970s and 1980s, we are the beneficiaries of a rich and varied harvest of gender-based initiatives which include:

- i) The availability of short-term certificate and non-certificate and longer-term degree programmes in Gender/Feminist Studies⁷;
- ii) A plethora of national, sub-regional and regional gender research networks operating with differing degrees of autonomy;
- iii) The unmistakable insertion of the African gender research community into a globally-networked community of researchers and/activist intellectuals drawn from other regions of the world⁸;
- iv) A sizeable investment in scholarly publishing around gender questions on the continent through dedicated journals, discussion papers, and book and monograph series;
- v) The emergence of a number of initiatives aimed at promoting leadership training for the benefit of younger women involved in gender work⁹; and
- vi) The emergence of a significant community of gender researchers and activists adept at facilitating policy dialogues and producing policy documents.

⁷ Apart from short courses offered by institutions like CODESRIA and the Africa Gender Institute of the University of Cape Town, there is a large number of African universities offering degree courses in Women and/or Gender Studies – and the list is still growing. Some of the more prominent of such university-based degree offerings are those located at Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana.

⁸ Again, examples are numerous here although DAWN is probably with citing specifically alongside ABANTU and Akina Mama wa Afrika.

⁹ Akina Mama wa Afrika, for example, organised an annual African Women's Leadership Institute for a number of years in Kampala, Uganda.

Moving the Agenda of African Gender Research Forward: The Challenges

Without doubt, gender research/studies has come a long way over the last four decades and half. The road travelled has not been an easy one and every victory registered did not come on a platter of gold. For this reason, there is plenty of room for self-congratulation. Such self-satisfaction must not, however, be allowed to obscure the many challenges that remain or produce a complacency that could be both self-defeating and counterproductive. For, although much ground has been covered, this has not been without its problems in opportunities lost, those terrains that remain untouched, the new contradictions produced, and the shifts in contextual environment that call for new innovations. In terms of opportunities lost and terrains not covered, gender research/studies has suffered the same broad problem that has afflicted much of African social research over the last few decades, namely, the increasing dearth of serious theoretical reflection and comparative insights that speak to African histories and contests and, therefore, bear a distinctive African value-added. Much too much of the efforts invested over the last decades has been devoted to local and localised case/empirical studies which, in themselves are not necessarily bad, except that the important next step of investing in theoretical reflections and comparative studies derived from the reading of the case-studies carried out has been generally lacking, taken up only by a few senior scholars. Is it any wonder that some of the best contributions flowing from African gender research – such as the concept of femocracy and state feminism¹⁰ – have been derived from an internalisation of various country/local experiences and formulated into general theories? Much more work of that kind needs to be undertaken in order to lift the standards of gender research to new heights and, proceeding from there, to position gender research as a key tool for the transformation of the African social sciences. Moreover, success in this domain is bound to further enhance the quality of the African input both into the setting of global agendas and the development of the contours of global debates in which African researchers seek legitimately to participate fully.

It has to be admitted too that, with regard to the terrains not covered, there were themes that were privileged in gender research much more than others – to a point where those themes, recurring as frequently as they did, almost reduced gender research to an exercise in the pursuit of predictable topics ranging from reproductive health to violence in the family. To forestall a misunderstanding: Those themes were certainly important and spoke to real concerns that needed –

¹⁰ Associated with some of the writings of Amina Mama.

and still need to be addressed. But in becoming the toast of one and all, they crowded other themes such as gender and science and technology, gender and the arts, gender and macro-economics, and other such concerns from the African intellectual production. Without doubt, those under-represented themes were more easily the objects of anecdotal evidence than the privileged domains of gender research. Furthermore, communities of gender researchers in Lusophone Africa – and to some extent, Arabophone Africa – tended to be less integrated into the emerging mainstream of networked scholars which the Anglophones and Francophones dominated easily.

Changes in context are always a fact of life but as it pertains to the field of gender research/studies which was borne out of struggles that still form part of living memory, when such changes have the potentiality to affect the process of the reproduction of the community of committed and networked scholars, it could be devastating. And it is this possibility that we are confronted with as the brain drain has meant the departure of the most talented gender scholars without an obvious mechanism for reproducing them, the toll which a market-driven university reform agenda is taking on gender studies especially on account of the deployment of market yardsticks for adjudging programme relevance, and the internal difficulties faced by a significant number of sub-regional and regional gender research networks, difficulties which have impacted adversely on the numbers of gender scholarly journals and newsletters on the continent. Thus, even as some parts of the continent are witnessing new – usually externally-sourced investments in Women and/or Gender Studies, others are witnessing the shut down of hard-won courses available on gender on account of a lack of qualified personnel. The basic question which this situation poses is simple: How might we constructively sustain the reproduction of the gender research community locally and continentally, doing so in ways which ensure that the environment of gender-driven scholarly life is robust and opportunities for cross-national learning are possible?

African gender researchers, given the historic context of their inevitable immersion into activism for social change, are a quintessential category of organic intellectuals. This position, as with all exercises in embedded intellectualism, comes with advantages and disadvantages. But over and beyond these is a need to create structured fora for the effective engagement of policy communities and the dissemination of the most pertinent research results produced. Investments in the creation and, perhaps, even institutionalisation of such as fora have been absent with the consequence that to the extent that gender-based policy work has been undertaken, it has tended to be episodic, dependent on the goodwill of interested policy makers, including donors, and often organised around pressing global events concerning women and for which politicians and policy makers need inputs which they then commission by way

of consultancies¹¹. The consultancy industry around gender has been reinforced by the increased donor interest in gender concerns in Africa; regrettably, the industry has developed in ways which disarticulate research and consultancy to the detriment of the former; it has also functioned on a highly individualised format which has tended to weaken interest in networking and reinforce the pressures for isolation and atomisation. A strategy for lifting gender research/studies in Africa to new heights will need to address this dysfunctionality.

Moving the Agenda of African Gender Research Forward: Proposals for Action

From the foregoing, it would seem that the next stage in the development of African gender research/studies will need to entail a range of inter-related initiatives spanning a variety of new directions in research, training, and dissemination. These initiatives, it is clear, would need to be simultaneously pursued on a regional scale and at local levels (national and sub-regional) and motivated by a desire to break new paths that could add value to the successes already registered. They should also feed into a strategy of consciously promoting institutionalised networking and outreach that transcends geographical, disciplinary, linguistic and generational barriers to the production of gendered knowledge. As much as possible, and mainly for the sake of avoiding a dissipation of energies, they should be anchored on the most viable institutional mechanisms that are already in existence, with an effort made to build greater programmatic synergies among the institutions. The historic articulation of a project of social responsibility into gender research/studies should be maintained without allowing it to detract from the challenges of developing that field of African knowledge production into a site for continuous innovation. Out of these considerations, it proposed that the following initiatives be considered:

- i) The launching of an annual research competition primarily geared at promoting studies that have a potentiality to generate new comparative knowledge and theoretical insights;
- ii) The institutionalisation of an annual thematic symposium on gender at which results of on-going research could be tabled for debate before a knowledgeable audience drawn from within and outside Africa;
- iii) The launching of a college of mentors who might play a role in mentoring younger gender researchers in African universities at a

¹¹ Some of the most prominent of such fora include the Nairobi women's conference, the Cairo population conference, and the Beijing women's conference.

time when the brain drain and other factors have taken their toll on capacity that was previously there;

- iv) The facilitation of a pan-African gender review as a much-needed complement to the existing scholarly feminist review that could itself benefit from enhanced support;
- v) The expansion of the opportunities that exist for younger gender researchers to benefit from short-term training in the gender methodology, as well as in writing and dissemination skills; and
- vi) The institutionalisation of a forum for gender-based policy dialogue as a regular feature of the struggle for the extension of the impact and frontiers of the outputs of African gender researchers.

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