

Editorial

The African Woman

Many an observer has recognised the positive contribution of the UN Decade for women that culminated in the 1985 Nairobi 3rd World Congress on Women where over 300 resolutions were passed on forward-looking strategies for the advancement of women globally, strategies that were complemented by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In a special meeting, the African women's group at the World Congress adopted the Nairobi Manifesto on various problems plaguing the continent and how these tended to affect women disproportionately. Commenting five years later in a special issue of *Africa Today* on the theme: 'After the Women's Decade: The Task Ahead for Africa', Stanlie James, who guest edited the issue, described the Manifesto as a compilation of the 'critical problems besetting Africa, including drought, the food crisis, massive population, political and religious fundamentalism, and restrictive policies imposed by international financial and donor agencies' which, together with 'illiteracy, unemployment and underdevelopment, malnutrition, lower life expectancy and physical abuse', continue to burden women more heavily than they do men.

Structural inequalities and social hierarchies informed more by stereotypes and prejudice than by the scientific reality of men and women as dynamic social actors are at the heart of the myriad of problems facing women in general and African women in particular. True, some mileage has been covered since the adoption of the UN convention to 'Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women', and since the Nairobi Manifesto. More women have broken through the corridors of power almost everywhere on the continent, to occupy ministerial positions and seats in parliament, where 11 African countries are amongst the leading 50 countries in the world in terms of number of women parliamentarians. With 48.8 per cent of its parliamentarians being women, Rwanda holds the world record. Liberia has come through the ravages of civil war to deliver in November 2005 Africa's first democratically elected female president, Ms Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Women-run businesses have grown and the number of women heading financial portfolios has increased significantly. The presence of women in the top ranks of the various professions has increased significantly, thanks to more women graduating from universities and institutions of higher education, a number of which are female-headed. Mamphela Ramphele has served as first female and first black Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and also as Vice-President of the World Bank. In 2004 Kenyan environmentalist activist Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Women and gender studies have picked up significantly in university programmes throughout Africa, and so have research, conferences, NGO and civil society empowerment initiatives targeting women. Feminist and gender scholarship by Africans has significantly enriched global debates, and created theoretical space for the tendency in some African soci-

eties not to conflate social roles with biological roles, as Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi would put it.

CODESRIA, in its own way, has contributed to the advancement of the fostering of research on women and gender, and by women through various research, training, policy dialogue and publication programmes, including the 1997 landmark book, *Engendering African Social Sciences*, edited by three of Africa's leading gender scholars, Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow. Apart from hosting the secretariat of the Association of African Women Researchers for Development (AAWORD) for twenty years, CODESRIA has had a number of joint initiatives and ongoing conversations with AAWORD. In 2004, CODESRIA launched its Gender Series to serve the goal of creatively extending the frontiers of its gender research and publications programmes. It is also designed to capture current debates and deepen the African contribution to reflections on the theme of gender, feminism and society. Through the series, gender institute and gender research programme, CODESRIA has taken a lead role in showcasing the best in African gender research and also in providing a platform for the emergence of new talents to flower. The thematic variety and analytic quality of contemporary debates and research in Africa around gender issues is testimony to the mileage that has been successfully covered since the early days when African feminists struggled hard to make their voices heard. Today, few are the social scientists unaware of the basic issues in gender research and the community of those applying the gender approach in their work has not ceased to grow. However, the challenges that remain in the policy process of engendering the social sciences are numerous, and addressing them requires the mustering of the capacities and convening powers of institutions such as CODESRIA.

These achievements, while worthy of celebration, are much too modest as evidenced by many of the contributions in this *CODESRIA Bulletin*, compared to the challenges that women continue to face in Africa. In addition to the outstanding problems detailed in the Nairobi Manifesto, new challenges have arisen. Particularly acute amongst these is the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic, which afflicts women far in excess of men, some of whom continue to behave with baffling irresponsibility and impunity. The intensification of consumerism and of poverty has only exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women who must struggle to get by in a world order that tends to render them invisible through exclusion and exploitation. Recent reports on the widespread sexual exploitation of girls in Liberia and elsewhere reveal the enormity of sexual violence against women, in war and in peace. While condemnation of and sanctions against such violence and excesses are to be saluted, concrete efforts must be made to redress the structures of inequality that make rape and sexual exploitation of women

possible. Through this special issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, facilitated by the Ford Foundation Eastern Africa Office, CODESRIA and Agenda reiterate their mutual commitment to the task of rethinking development, peace, democracy, governance, human rights and poverty in Africa such that social hierarchies and structures championed by gender inequalities are radically minimised or buried for good. *CODESRIA Bulletin* believes that African women as a community determined to redefine and reappraise their roles and status in society and globally, need the space and autonomy of voice to articulate their concerns. As the editors of *Engendering African Social Sciences* have argued, it is hoped that such a critical process of redefinition and reappraisal will provide the basis necessary for the very survival of Africa. Indeed, it must, if we are to avoid accusations of condoning and excelling at sterile rhetoric on the African woman.

But real progress with this objective is only possible to the extent that struggles for the empowerment of women are put in perspective. Mamphela Ramphele, writing in the same *Africa Today* issue on Nairobi +5, questions 'major flaws' in certain variants of feminist thinking that are still very much around 16 years after, and that have tended to obscure rather than elucidate the analysis of women's issues. These major flaws, to her, include the tendency to see global or African 'sisterhood' as 'the answer' to all ills that women suffer in society, as all social interaction is seen as being reducible to a structured dominance of men over women. There is also the tendency towards essentialist arguments that accord women 'moral superiority' over men, implying that women would necessarily be better leaders, organisers and members of institutions, including government structures, simply because, being women, they could be trusted with power. Their nurturing skills are seen as placing them in a position to care about others, including society as a whole. The risk of 'sexism in reverse' exists as well, as women fail to distinguish between 'male power structures' and 'men'. Could this in part explain why much of the struggle for equality has tended to narrow fields of power down to the visibly political, thereby rendering 'invisible' all other fields of power, both material and symbolic?

It is important to note, Ramphele argues, that 'men do not hold the monopoly over the potential to dominate', especially in a context where social hierarchies of race, class, age and geography compete or complement gender as power differentials. Failure to take these factors into account leads to 'fragmented and unsatisfactory approaches' that fail to address the problems in the real and messy world out there. An attempt has to be made to understand how various social hierarchies articulate with gender if African social scientists, feminists and women are to help formulate viable intervention strategies, which can speak to women and men under different circumstances. The recognition of the different experiences of women is hardly enough, as

only an approach informed by the various social hierarchies that shape and are shaped by gender can help towards the formulation of viable intervention strategies.

Such an integrated approach to analysing power relations, Ramphele argues, calls upon feminists 'to be just as fervent in their opposition to racism, economic deprivation and exploitation, hierarchical and undemocratic practices, as they are in relation to sexism'. The approach is needed to strengthen the feminist movement and enlist the support of 'those sectors of society who have to grapple with the impact of these other power differentials in their lives'. The call for universal sisterhood does not and should not imply glossing over the hierarchies that challenge such aspirations and interrogate claims of strategic essentialism.

However, Ramphele cautions, such an integrated approach do not come without its risks, which include 'having the courage to face up to the contradictions within ourselves, first and foremost – our own vested interests as individuals, as well as our fears and hopes'. There is also the risk of ridicule and discouragement from colleagues for those who pose large complex academic questions on gender issues, and career prospects are often curtailed for critical scholars who challenge conventional wisdom. There is the risk as well, that the powerful, be these men or women, are unlikely to countenance 'analysts who pose a threat to fundamental power relations'.

The way forward for the African woman, Ramphele suggests, 'lies in taking risks to address unequal power relations at all levels'. In doing this, she must avoid the fallacious tendency to see power as a zero-sum game that is either with men or women, and not shared; hence the obsession with the rhetoric of the transfer of power from men to women as a strategy to redress the imbalances of the past. Visible forms of power are not necessarily the most salient or effective. Feminist should not lose sight of knowledge as power, so their views do not increasingly appear like a reflection of their own privileged position as theorists. Intellectuals do not hold the monopoly over revolutionary consciousness. Through the wide ranging reflections in this special issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, CODESRIA and Agenda invite women and gender scholars, Feminists, social scientists, advocacy groups and policy makers to move beyond sterile rhetoric and start articulating in concrete and practical terms the empowerment of the African woman whose real life situation is informed by such social hierarchies as race, ethnicity, culture, class, age, geography and citizenship.

References

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Adebayo Olukoshi
Executive Secretary

Francis B. Nyamnjoh
Publications and Dissemination