

AN INVESTIGATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR GENDER RESEARCH IN AFRICA IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

**By
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I. Introduction: Africa - a continent in Crisis

The majority of African countries are in crisis. Economic domination through corporate globalization is the primary global strategy for economic growth. The resulting development paradigm is re-colonization through the reproduction of hegemonic tendencies that facilitate the movement of trans-national capital. Protracted recession, the debt burden, Structural Adjustment Programmes, externally-controlled privatization and an emphasis on exports are creating a cultural crisis of major proportions. The marginalization of Africa through corporate globalization has led to widespread poverty, the destruction of many African economies, social dislocation and civil strife. This is compounded by the erosion of the life-supporting capacities of many African ecosystems. Authoritarian regimes and gender-based discrimination complete the picture.

Global economic processes are producing new dimensions of structural racism through North/South and Black/White polarizations. The United Nations conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa last year recognized the correlation between corporate globalization and racism and emphasized the gendered dimensions of this correlation. Racialized women, become recruited into the international labor force as cheap sources of unprotected and migratory labor and as objects of sex tourism, trafficking and domestic servitude. The overwhelming evidence seems to suggest that gender-based hierarchies and gender subordination combined with structural racism are being reinforced by globalization African women are among the most severely affected. (Steady, 2002).

The study of gender in Africa cannot escape the realities of post-colonial domination. Through the reproduction of colonial-like policies supported by international financial institutions and international corporate laws, the patriarchal ideologies of colonization are being reproduced through globalization. It is no surprise then that despite significant epistemological challenges of the post-modernist era, Eurocentric concepts, methodologies and paradigms in the study of gender in Africa over the last 30 years continue. They remain the compelling and pervasive force in presenting one-dimensional, frozen and simplified writings about women in Africa.

This paper examines the impact of external concepts, methodologies and paradigms in the study of gender in Africa as supporting academic structures validating the exploitation of Africa. It also proposes African-centered approaches based on an understanding of African socio-cultural realities, feminist traditions and philosophies. The aim is to develop gender-focused frameworks of analysis that can bring out the multiple and varied social locations of African women while maintaining their specific identities and priorities and developing linkages with other women. Hopefully, this will allow for new approaches in gender research that will promote greater understanding of gender issues, gender equality, social transformation and women's empowerment. In this regard, the paper uses historical, cultural and post-modernist analyses to argue for an emphasis on culture. It also makes a case for the relevance of oppositional discourses. These approaches can best address and challenge both the continuities of patriarchal myths and 'tradition' and the impact of colonial patriarchy and racism as they continue to be expressed in global economic domination.

II. The persistence of Eurocentric paradigms: new wines in old bottles

Academic interests in Africa historically stemmed from the need to maintain systems of colonization and exploitation through value-maintaining ideologies that included scientific racism. Today, globalization, a new and more insidious form of domination has replaced the colonial project accompanied by corresponding neo-liberal paradigms. Concepts of the African woman continue to be central to the development of these paradigms since gender is an organizing principle in the accumulation and operation of colonial and transnational capital and in the allocation of resources and privilege. What is interesting, is the way in which these paradigms continue to reproduce themselves.

The discipline of anthropology, the most influential in African Studies, had three main approaches that reinforced colonial domination and racism. Social darwinism, structural/functionalism and 'acculturation' theories. Anthropology was often linked to colonialism and anthropologists helped to develop the image of the 'savage' which according to Macquet, helped to justify colonial expansion and domination. (Maquet, 1964).

Many of the earlier theoretical distortions were criticized as biased, myopic and based on faulty methodologies and unreliable data. Nonetheless they became reinforced through modernization theory which promoted the notion of

'stages' of growth. Modernization theory is now rearing its ugly head through the prism of neo-liberalism, the pillar of corporate globalization. Neo-evolutionalists echo modernization theorists through their proclivity for dichotomies. Conceptual frameworks applied to Africa are often presented in Eurocentric-oriented dichotomies of rural/urban, formal/informal, traditional/modern, developed/underdeveloped and so forth. Whatever the division, Africa always ended up on the lower rung of the social evolutionary ladder and in methodological schemes of classification..

The equilibrium model of the British school of structuralism-functionalism also had a colonial *raison d'être*. It provided analyses of 'tribal' law and order so that the 'natives' could be effectively governed through the policy of 'indirect rule'. This policy was in effect quite misleading since the British established a number of 'warrant chiefs' and 'district commissioners' that served as puppets of the British colonial government. The equilibrium model mystified reality and regarded colonialism as a given. (Owosu, 1975). It also ignored the destructive consequences of three centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade involving more than 20 million Africans. (Galt and Smith, 1976).

Structuralism/functionality continues to be relevant through the essentializing tendencies of globalization, a new form of colonization. The colonial economy has been replaced by a 'new and improved' international colonial system whose structure and function depends on domination by a single functioning market controlled by the North. Today, neo-liberal paradigms justify globalization in much the same way as their antecedents, namely social Darwinism, modernization theory and structural/functionality justified colonialism. Liberal-oriented international relations studies privilege Western political institutions within a global political system dominated by Western capital and patriarchal ideologies. (Pettman, 1996).

The 'acculturation' model found mostly in studies of social change in Africa is not much different. It assumes the inevitability of assimilation to Western norms, values and lifestyles as a result of contact with the West. Seldom is the reverse shown to illustrate the impact of Africa on the West through music, religion, intellectual traditions and so forth. Acculturation studies have for the most part been concerned with what Magubane refers to as 'symbols of Europeanization' and 'Westernization'. Such symbols are measured by European attire, occupations, education and income and have resulted in the inferiorization of African culture, values and esthetics.

Because colonialism was ignored, these studies also ignored the lack of free choice and decision-making and the role of coercion in the process of acculturation. In effect, colonialism not only blocked indigenous processes of decision-making, it also destroyed indigenous processes of knowledge generation. The result is a form of scientific colonialism sustained by scientific racism. Historical studies were no less Eurocentric and racist. Africa was presented as having no history, no civilization and no culture. Studies of the classical period have consistently denied the contributions of Africans to Egyptian civilization and to the civilizations of ancient Greece.¹

Most of the themes of social science research fashioned by colonial conquest, imperialistic designs or neo-liberal motivations have also influenced gender studies and the feminist discourse. With the exception of Boserup, whose analysis was a critique of the gender bias in economic development (Boserup, 1970) modernization theory tends to see African women at a lower stage of development (read evolution) compared to women of the West; structuralism-functionality imposes a functional explanation in the study of gender relations that is essentialist in nature. Acculturation studies have been replaced by 'women in development' or 'gender in development' studies which seek to 'integrate African women in development' by making them more like Western women.

III. Oppositional discourses

Post-colonial and post- modern discourses are providing a revisionist examination of epistemologies and paradigms. They are challenging and reframing many of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings that are derived from a strongly positivistic, universalizing and evolutionary tradition of Western scholarship. They are concerned with the historical and modern imperatives of the global political economy. It is within this trajectory that gender research in Africa can yield the best results.

Eurocentric paradigms can lead to an abstract mapping of systems of stratification rather than to a more profound interrogation of the very institutions that determine such lines and parameters of social inquiry. The widespread poverty among women in Africa requires an understanding of the construction of social inequality at the global level which privileges some countries and its men and women, (primarily among groups in the North) at the expense of others, notably in the South.

Revisionist historiography and the work of Diop, Bernal, UNESCO, Black Studies programs and Afro-centric paradigms are challenging the tenacity of scientific racism posing as scholarship. Revisionist historians, economists and other social scientists focusing on the impact of the international political economy on Africa have made significant

¹ See Diop, 1974 and Bernal, 1987 for challenges to these positions.

contributions in challenging the scientific colonialism and racism inherent in Eurocentric scholarship. Rodney's **How Europe underdeveloped Africa** was a major milestone in this development and has been reinforced by dependency theorists. Their studies provide a basis for understanding how and why the underdevelopment of Africa has continued and how it has become intensified through corporate globalization. (Rodney, 1981; Amin, 1974; 1997; Bernal, 1987; Asante, 1990; Amadiume, 1997; Fall, 1999; Pheko, 2002).

Corporate globalization, supported by neo-liberal paradigms, is the process that directs the market with the aim of ensuring the unfettered flow of transnational capital. In this process, nation states are rendered powerless through laws that protect multinational cooperation and that are regulated by the World Trade Organization. International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF impose conditionalities of Structural Adjustment Programmes designed to promote macro-economic stability and through loans that stifle the economic growth of countries of the South. The result is a reverse resource flow through debt servicing of at least 14 billion U.S. dollars a year from Africa to the affluent nations in the North. This is greater than the amount received in *real* international aid.

Corporate globalization is increasing marginalization of African countries in the global economy, a process that transcends gender but that has gender implications. Globalization has a compounded effect on women because of certain structural disadvantages in the global and national division of labor and inequalities in the distribution of assets and power.

IV. Feminists of Africa and the South challenge Eurocentric paradigms

The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) was among the earliest women's organizations of the South to adopt a critical approach to research and to challenge Eurocentric paradigms from a feminist and post-colonial perspective. As early as the mid 70s, it called for the de-colonization of research and established a critical gender research agenda. It also has a major research agenda on globalization (Fall, 1999). In the mid 80s, following the lead of AAWORD, The Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), a research organization of women of the South also challenged the destructive neo-liberal model of development and its impact on women of the South.

Throughout the 80s and 90s feminist scholars of color in the South and North led an intellectual movement that challenged essentialist notions of womanhood and insisted on recognizing and interrogating difference. Crucial to this task was the need to understand how the social location of women is determined by race, ethnicity, class, status and access to privilege. Those at the lower end of the scale face powerlessness, exclusion, despair and vulnerabilities. Such constructions of social inequality confers power on some at the expense of others. (Steady, 1981; Sen and Grown, 1986; Essed, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Imam, 1997).

a. Methodological challenges in investigating gender.

There are some fundamental assumptions in investigation of gender that do not fit the African reality, even when controlling for African diversity. One is the belief in the universal subordination of women. Another is the separation of the public and private spheres into gendered spheres that gave men an advantage by participating in the public sphere. From this analysis followed studies seeking to explain asymmetrical relations between men and women.

If one is to believe the universal subordination argument, then one has to ignore the ways in which social location based on race, ethnicity, class, color and so forth confers power and privilege. Furthermore, one has to question the sensitivity of the research tools used to investigate 'subordination' and also the methodological approaches used to apply it cross-culturally. The 'universal subordination of women' argument forces us to settle for the highly contested notion that 'biology is destiny' and to ask the following questions: Whose biology? Whose destiny? Are all female biologies socially constructed the same way? What if they come in different colors? What if they are stunted by poverty and malnutrition? What if they are subject to trafficking like a commodity? What if they cannot carry a foetus to full term because of poor health?

Similarly, if one accepts that gender is a metaphor for relations of power, how do we define power? do all men have power? Do some women have power? How are the people with the most power socially constructed? In many African societies, power is not only vested in political organizations. Women can derive power from their position in religious systems, in female secret societies such as the Sande of Sierra Leone and Liberia as well as through their roles as mothers, especially when the society is matrilineal and has matrifocal ideologies.

The post-modernist challenges of the 80s by feminist scholars of the South included serious critiques of methodologies which questioned the right of Western feminists to assume dominance on feminist discourses. They also questioned their essentializing proclivities without regard to race, nationality and so forth. Mohanty, following

others, also questioned the production of 'Third World Women' as a homogeneous category in Western feminist texts and as subaltern subjects. (Mohanty, 1985). A major critique along this line also centered on the essentialist proclivity of lumping all women in one basket without clarifying who is being spoken about and who is speaking for whom, or who has greater credibility in framing the issue. (Nnaemeka, 1998).

Problems of framing are also problematic when filtered through the racist and sexist biases. For example, Narayan, writing on women of India challenges the tendency to use so called 'cultural' explanations of practices like sati and dowry murders in India while ignoring murders due to domestic violence in the United States. This has led to the visibility of dowry murder in India and to the comparative invisibility of domestic violence murders in the United States. (Narayan, 1997, 95)

While not condoning harmful cultural practices with patriarchal origins, genital surgical interventions in Africa have been over sensationalized. African women are presented as savages or damaged victims worthy of nothing better than scorn. At the same time, harmful plastic surgery to reconstruct healthy vaginas, breasts and other body parts in the West are ignored. Also ignored, is the fact that they are also responding to cultural dictates that define the ideology of womanhood. Western plastic surgery, as Foucault would put it, is an example of 'docile bodies' succumbing to the coercive pressures of Western patriarchal culture. (Foucault, 1992).

b. African women and the 'gender' problematique

The term 'gender' is a highly contested concept when applied to Africa. 'Gender' has become the main focus of Western feminist discourse during the second wave of feminism. Like other systems of thought it has been exported to the South as a concept, an analytical tool and as a policy initiative. The domination of Western concepts and terminologies has thus become apparent in the term 'gender'. It is well established in development circles of the United Nations which in turn influences the agenda and budget of national governments and even academic research.

In 1981, I pointed out in the introduction to the book **The Black Woman Cross-Culturally**, that within a racist political/economic hegemony, White women can become primary oppressors. It is now widely accepted that women are a non-essentialist category and represent diverse groups with different social locations. 'Gender' can therefore mean different things to different people since it carries the ideologies of the socio-cultural context in which it is constructed.

Without doubt, the term 'gender' carries a Western bias. It tends to be myopic, inventive, and can obscure other differences. Because it is Western, it reveals white Western middle class biases and obscures other differences based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and so forth. In this regard, it fails to recognize the role of women themselves in other structures of oppression.

'Gender' is analogous to difference but contains within it notions of inequality and is often viewed as a metaphor representing relations of power. However, analysis of power is often restricted to male/female power relations only, ignoring power relations based on race, class, ethnicity, age, nationality and so forth. Thus the various ways in which gender has been used, namely, as a basis organizing principle of society; as a heuristic tool, as a crucial site for the application of dichotomous models and as an indicator of progress in the development process have to be questioned.

Furthermore, the term 'gender' tends to represent a proclivity towards dichotomous models that do not often fully represent the African reality, although exceptions can be found. For example, a study of cultural boundaries and social interactions in Africa has argued that trans-social and transactional cultural flows are inherently gendered and that gender is a crucial site of intersection between 'inside' and 'outside'. (Grosz-Ngate and Kobole, eds. 1999,p.8).

c. Two major examples challenging the concept of 'gender' in Africa.

African societies are complex and recognize exceptions to general normative rules. They and use other concepts that convey a cyclical ordering of social life in addition to oppositional and hierarchical ones or on ones based on biological classification. For an example, changes in the lifecycle can alter women's status so that post-menopausal women can assume political functions and serve as elders and advisers on the same basis as men.

Similarly, female ancestors can share equal status with male ancestors. Moreover, 'third genders' 'agendered and trans-gendered entities' and 'alternative genders' have been discovered in many parts of the non-Western world. In Africa, institutions such as 'woman marriage' and the ambiguity of the gender of some deities have challenged the dichotomous model of the West.

Major challenges of the term 'gender' have come from African women, the most celebrated of whom are Amadiume and Oyewummi. Amadiume's book, **Male Daughters, Female Husbands** was ground breaking in

deconstructing the word 'gender' in the Igbo context. In her analysis of sex-gender distinctions, she exposes what she described as the racism and ethnocentrism of earlier studies of Igbo society by Western scholars. She convincingly demonstrates how misleading biological categories can be in studying sex and gender since either sex can assume socially viable roles as male or female.

Oyewumi in **The Invention of Women**, further challenges the heavy reliance of Western scholarship on what is seen 'world view' rather than what is perceived through other senses 'world sense'. She argues that although 'gender' is deemed to be socially constructed, biology itself is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social'. Hence the separation between 'sex' and 'gender' is superficial since 'sex' itself has elements of construction. She insists that this 'biologization' inherent in the Western articulation of social difference is by no means universal. Through imperialism it has been imposed on other cultures resulting in the imposition of the term 'gender' which, being socially constructed, may not have existed at all in some societies.

She argues that 'Gender' has become important in Yoruba studies not as an artifact of Yoruba life but because Yoruba life, past and present, has been translated into English to fit the Western pattern of body-reasoning. This pattern is one in which gender is omnipresent, the male the norm, and the female the exception; it is a pattern in which power is believed to inhere in maleness in and of itself. It is a pattern that is not grounded in evidence.' (Oyewumi, p. 30).

Oyewumi argues that in the written discourse of the Yoruba gender is privileged over seniority only because of Western dominance in the conceptualization of research problems and in social theory. In Yoruba society, seniority takes precedence over gender and many Yoruba such as *oba* or *alafin* nouns are gender-free. The creation of 'woman' as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state since in precolonial societies, male and female had multiple identities that were not based on anatomy. 'For females, colonization was a two-fold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination' (Oyewumi, p.124)

V. The need for alternative African-focused methodologies.

There is a need to critique and challenge the Eurocentric models in the study of women in Africa. Since most models are linked to political conquest through colonialism and corporate conquest through globalization, oppositional discourses inherent in various forms of Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and post-modernism are still relevant to African gender research.

Such approaches will of necessity have to include one or more of the following: a historical perspective, a holistic perspective, multidimensionality, multiple time frames, multiple levels of analysis, multiple identities and realities, relational and dynamic contexts, comparative methods, oral history, life history and so forth..

The need to link theory and praxis is essential. Given the empirical reality of poverty, economic exploitation and marginality, theory for the majority of Africans is a luxury. The thrust towards praxis will expose and centralize invisibility, voicelessness and autogenic social processes need to act and change retrograde developments. It will also help to reconcile universal and post-modernist tensions.

VI. African-focused and gender-sensitive approaches

One of the major constraints to gender research in Africa is the weak data base and the lack of a critical mass of gender researchers due to the low priority given to social science research and to the brain drain. The challenge is greater than the resources and available capacity. For example, African research on gender has to develop methodologies for criticisms and revisionist endeavours as well as methodologies for alternative research. The same standards for data gathering procedures that will satisfy the basic scientific requirements of validity, reliability and replicability have to be applied. Added to this will be new methods related to language and to indigenous systems of thought so that the framing of gender will be determined within the context of the relationship of language to culture.

Crucial to the redefining of an alternative approach to research from an African perspective will be the following: Policy-orientation; critique of donor-driven research; social impact and basic research; viewpoint and value orientation, time orientation, geographical orientation; levels of analysis and an emphasis on culture. All of these factors will be conditioned by the type problem to be investigated, the kinds of data available, research instruments to be employed and the need to prioritize the research problems to be investigated. (Steady, 1977).

Given the diversity of Africa, theoretical applications have to be developed through dynamic, multi-dimensional and heterogeneous methodological approaches and adjusted for contextual validity. . However, it is quite legitimate to speak of an African perspective or an African reality even if only one or two African countries are indicated. This type of typological projection can become a valid heuristic tool. When one speaks of Eurocentric models, one does not have to indicate which particular European country or people is being referred to.

a. Policy orientation

Western scholarship places a high value on theorizing and theory-building at the expense of pragmatism and relevance. Hence higher prestige is given to theoreticians. For Africa, there are many economic and social problems, not least of which is its dependency on the West and its marginalization through globalization, which theory cannot solve. Lack of interest in practical problems has been shown to lead to an insensitivity to the people studied and to an emphasis on professional advancement by the researcher.

Over 40 years ago, a European scholar Galtung in referring to what he called 'scientific colonialism' compared the researcher who extracts data for professional profit to the colonialist who exports the resources out of Africa. In the following analogy, he demonstrates a parallel between the two systems of extraction and processing:

'...to export data about the country to one's own country for processing into manufactured goods', such as books and articles.... is essentially similar to what happens when raw materials are exported at a low price and reimported as manufactured goods at a very high cost. The most important, most rewarding and most difficult phase of the process take place abroad' (Galtung, 1967; p. 296).

b. Critique of donor-driven research

Given the ideological nature of development policies in Africa that are often driven by the neo-liberal agenda and the dictates of globalization the research agenda on gender tends to be determined by external priorities and policy orientations that reinforce the re-colonization of African social science. Donor-driven research can also undermine academic programmes if the faculty is motivated by the pursuit of funds for research especially in light of the economic difficulties of the continent and the low salaries of faculty. African researchers have to be critical of donor-driven and donor-sponsored research. Particular attention must be paid to various projects sponsored by international donor agencies and to certain types of externally-designed research. Some research on health care, nutrition, agricultural production, migration and education may be designed to promote neo-liberal policies related to making African markets and labour more accessible to exploitation.

External gender research priorities can also center around concerns with fertility regulation, female circumcision, rather than to the global economic forces and liberalization policies that result in increasing malnutrition and poverty. Nor is enough attention being given to the dumping of guns, other lethal weapons, drugs, pornographic material and dirty technologies in Africa. Little interest is also shown in the illegal trafficking of young girls from Africa to Europe to be used as prostitutes and domestic servants under slavery-like conditions. The destructive impact of debt, structural adjustment policies, unemployment, export-oriented industries, sex tourism and so forth are often also overlooked.

c. Social impact and basic research

Social impact research is critical. A number of studies can be conducted as intensive micro-level studies for purposes of evaluating the impact of 'development projects in small communities'. Although a number of international projects have an evaluation component built in, such an evaluation need not have local input and may reflect the vested interest of certain interest groups abroad. It is important that evaluative research be given a high priority by African social scientists.

Micro-level research can also be conducted as basic research that can have policy implications. Intensive research, using both qualitative and quantitative methods can be most useful and yield relevant information from which valid conclusions can be drawn. Intensive social surveys can provide useful information about food distribution, income distribution and demographic changes and can provide a good profile of the health status of a community. For example, it can lead to a clearer evaluation of the fertility rates in a given country by taking cognizance of factors such as infertility, infant mortality and mortality from the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as fertility. Governments will then be presented with realistic projections on which to base a population policy.

d. Viewpoint and Value Orientation

The researcher is not a neutral observer. He or she brings existentialist limitations to the scholarly endeavour. The values and biases of the researcher are inevitably injected into the research. A researcher has a certain obligation to become involved in the realities and problems of the 'subjects' under study. Research in Africa has to be geared towards a certain degree of involvement and inter-subjectivity. The aim should be to contribute to improving the life of the people studied rather than to exploit them for professional advancement. Very often there is an indifference and a patronizing attitude to the 'subjects' of research, especially when the researcher is a foreigner with vested professional interests outside of Africa. Very few researchers bring back to the community the results of their study or give anything back. The subject/object or insider/outsider dichotomy is increasingly being challenged by both Western and scholars from the South. Most scholars of the South now insist the study of culture from the inside by an insider.

The overriding problem facing Africa today is that of the destruction of African societies by forces of corporate globalization resulting in poverty, illiteracy and disease. The major mission of an scholarly endeavour in the social sciences should be the elimination of the conditions that produce massive poverty and human misery among the masses of African people. The new researcher has to be involved in improving the well being of African people. Involvement would necessitate abandoning the subject/object dichotomy of social science to one of 'intersubjectivity' more akin to an indigenous model with elements of advocacy, protest and social engineering. Such approaches will also of necessity be multidisciplinary, policy-oriented as well as participatory both on the side of the researcher and of the people being studied. The aim would be to demystify the research process itself since data gathering procedures will be linked to problem solving and can be participatory.

Quantitative and mathematical research instruments designed for use in more technologically complex societies may have limited relevance when applied to Africa. They may also be more prone to bias due to the variability of the research capacity and data base. Research instruments, data-collecting and data-analyzing procedures have to be sensitively designed and made uncomplicated to encourage participation and involvement and to have practical relevance. Research methodology from an African perspective has to be partisan- i.e. dedicated to the progress and advancement of the African people. An appropriate value orientation would lead to research formulations and projects that aim to be action and policy oriented, problem solving and focused on the improvement of the African condition.

e. Time Orientation

Emphasis should be given to an analysis of social processes on a continuum that will involve the past, the present and the future. A historical perspective will be essential in understanding the role of conquest and colonization in shaping the themes and trajectory of research in Africa as well as in developing new forms of colonization such as corporate globalization. Urbanization and social change will be seen, not as inevitable processes of modernization but as a distortion of African indigenous development through economic domination. The African worldview encompasses dimensions of the past, present and future. Stated simply, the dead, the living and those yet to be born are essential for maintaining cosmological balance. This balance has been destabilized and has important gender implications leading to a loss of social status for women not only in the political and economic spheres but also in the realm of ritual and religion..

f. Geographical Orientation : Incorporating the African Diaspora

African is no longer confined to its geographical entity. The Transatlantic slave trade led to the dispersal of Africans on a massive scale. Today, Africans move as migrants, refugees and international civil servants to all parts of the world. The study of Africa must now include 'Global Africa' in all its historical, socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions. In a book I edited recently, this concept was central to an analysis of Black Women of Africa and the African Diaspora within the current international economy. I advanced the notion of African Feminism as a theory and praxis for the liberation of African women from gender-based discrimination compounded by racism, the legacy of colonialism, and the injustices of the international political economy.²

g. Levels of Analysis

A useful orientation in terms of level of analysis is one that combines both macro-and micro-levels of analysis within a given national or international boundary. This orientation can be used to demonstrate the larger systems of interaction that exist between the rural area and the urban area. Thus, rural and urban areas can be seen as systems in a larger framework rather than as fossilized units presented in monographs. This perspective of rural/urban interaction is missing in most studies of Africa. The interconnectedness of phenomena across broad spatial domains has also been absent from most studies of African urbanization.

Orientations that show dynamic interactions rather than atomized unitary systems are essential to understanding the fluidity of the African social situation requiring linkages among the political, economic and cultural systems as well as geographical linkages between rural and urban areas and even between countries and sub-regions. This orientation will also facilitate pan –African research and the strengthening of African research networks designed to build capacity for indigenous research in which similar problems can be examined in a number of countries in Africa.

A continuum must also be maintained between the macro-and micro level and the holistic and particular. In our attempt to understand the position of African societies within the international economic system and the historical conditions that have shaped the relationship of inequality between the rich and the poor nations, a macro-level

² See Steady, 1981, 1987; 2000; 2001; 2002).

perspective of global dimensions is a useful one. Here we will need to re-examine neo-Marxist methodology in the context of Africa. Its theoretical and political significance as it affects social science research ought to be given greater attention. This will lead to an understating of how forms of imperialist domination affect a country in terms of means of production, property ownership and the relationship between class, gender and the family.

We need to study the relationship of imported ideologies, religions, educational systems and other aspects of the superstructure to the oppression of the African masses. The South has produced eminent scholars who have articulated this view. The research efforts of African scholars must continue to study the theoretical and political implication of oppositional discourses and methodologies in the context of Africa.

h. An Emphasis on culture

Culture is a collective pattern of living that conveys the norms and values of society that is handed down from generation to generation. It is both dynamic and resilient and has positive, negative and neutral attributes. The study of African cultures have to include an inquiry into the continuities of gender discrimination and to determine where the cultural, historical, gendered and racial markers uphold, distort and undermine the 'real' and the 'authentic'.

Because culture represents routine behavior that carry norms and values of a society, they are often not easily changed. Okeke has argued against the tendency to regard gender discrimination inherent in cultural practices as being acceptable because it is the 'tradition'. She shows how patriarchal continuities, even when they contain contradictions can support claims of the rightness of tradition. For an example, the contradictions between statutory and customary law and the weaknesses in statutory law can lead to the strengthening of traditional justifications that still privilege men in relation to property rights, inheritance laws, etc. This can result in 'relations of power which keep in place an inequitable social structure that privileges the dominant gender' (Okeke, 2000, p.6)

Essed in her study of gendered racism in Europe has shown how everyday racism is the interweaving of racism in the routine of day to day life, in a way that makes racial injustices seem normal and a part of what can be expected. She notes that the focus on everyday manifestation of systemic inequality extends outside the field of race relations as well. This contributed to granting 'the everyday' generic meaning, everyday inequalities, everyday sexism' (Essed, 2002, p. 210)

An examination of the role of gender in the socio-cultural construction of hierarchies and hierarchy sustaining structures has to continue as an important research agenda for African social science. For example, the gender implications of the legacies of colonialism, apartheid and racism have only been systematically studied within the last 20 years. We still do not have comprehensive studies of the role of gender as a central aspect of armed conflict, civil wars and the erosion of the African state.

Gender-based analyses are also important in our understanding of the patriarchal myth which is being sustained by forces of globalization that privilege men in cases of privatization of land, liberalization of markets, etc. and can lead to alliances among men that ordinarily would be enemies on the basis of East/West, North/South and White/Non-White divisions.

Culture has valuable and positive assets and provide effective models for gender research that can lead to the empowerment and advancement of African women. African feminism as defined in 1981 outlined the value of African women in the ideological, institutional and customary realms. Women's power bases are partly derived from cultural values that stress the potency of a female principle governing life and reproduction though motherhood and the centrality of children. Women can also control political and ritual spaces. Women's indigenous groups can provide important leveraging mechanisms for women and are instrumental in promoting sustainable development projects. So rather than dismiss African cultures as archaic, we need to conduct more studies using culture as the paradigmatic framework that has the potential of producing action-oriented research capable of transforming society and empowering women.

VII. The continuing relevance of oppositional Discourses: The Political Economy Paradigm.

The major problem confronting most women in Africa today is poverty. This compounds their lack of access to strategic resources, facilities, basic literacy and economic and political decision-making. In addition, they are faced with health and nutritional problems, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic and deteriorating environments that can no longer sustain them. In order to fully comprehend and address the deepening poverty in Africa, a comprehensive study is needed of the causes consequences of poverty and its chronic and protracted nature in the African context. Analysis of the conditions and processes involved in the production, reproduction of poverty and its structural nature must be conducted in its spatial and temporal context as well as from a cross-cultural perspective within Africa.

Globalization facilitates the movement of capital across national boundaries and is characterized by a deepening of markets across borders aided by communication technologies, international laws and the monitoring role of the World Trade Organization. It affects countries differently and uses traditional institutions, the informal labor market and women's labor to facilitate the process of forging a 'single market' dominated by the North. While some countries are experiencing growth and market integration, others, like those in the South, especially Africa are being marginalized. The term 'a market apartheid' has been applied to this process. Inequality has increased between and within countries. Even the World Bank, one of the sponsors of globalization paints a dismal picture.

'One sixth of the world's population produce 78% of the world's goods and services and get 78% of the world's income, an average of \$70 per day. Three-fifths of the world's people in the six poorest countries receive 6% of the world's income; less than \$2 a day. However, this poverty goes beyond income. While 7 out of 1,000 children die before age 5 in high-income countries, more than 90 out of 1,000 die in low-income countries.'³

The Human Development Report of 1999 showed an increase in inequality between countries. Within the past decade, the number of individuals in Eastern Europe and Central Asia living on less than U.S. \$1 rose to 13 million. The corresponding number of 35 million in South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, the number actually tripled to 39 million..⁴ One can only imagine the gender implications when compounded with gender-based discrimination. Macro economic policies often makes gender disaggregated impacts difficult to assess because of the way in which they are conceptualized and the focus on official policy rather than the realities on the ground.

The World Bank figures are even higher and show that between 1987 and 2000, the number of people living on \$1 or less (65cents) a day increased by more than 80 million in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Dembele, 'One of the most dramatic impacts of trade and investment liberalization in Africa has been the weakening, even the collapse of many African states. Among the factors that contributed to this collapse are the huge revenue losses, resulting from sweeping trade and investment liberalization' (Dembele, 2002, p. 78). African countries experience huge losses in revenues from import taxes from which they derive 90% of their fiscal revenues. The losses have meant greater dependence of up to 80% of their budget on external sources.

In spite of these grim realities, the policy preference for the international community controlled by the North and the IMF and World Bank, the major international financial institutions is to develop strategies for poverty reduction within the context of the market and the instruments of liberalization and privatization. The mantra is 'trade not aid'. Free trade is now well recognized as being anything but free, and trade liberalization is viewed as a major contributor to poverty in Africa with serious gender implications. According to Dembele, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where poverty has steadily increased during the last two decades and all development indicators reveal a continuing deterioration. Trade liberalization is a major contributor to this human crisis.

The political economy approach offers one of the best explanatory models for full understanding of the political economy of African countries that is shaping gender relations. According to Pheko, multilateral financial institutions are forcing insidious policies of liberalization and globalization, market ascendancy and the diminished roles of the state, that have been unsuccessful in industrialized countries. She urges African women to be aware of the dangers of trade liberalization and resist it. The role of gender research and gender researchers as activists in this process is crucial since privatization and the private sector are notoriously gender biased. The public sector has been the most advantageous for women's formal sector employment but Structural Adjustment Policies mandate retrenchment in the public sector and cut backs in the social sector, such as health and education, that are of extreme importance to women.

'As women, we need to continue applying a gender analysis to all trade agreements and globalization processes. The human rights analysis should also be applied while strong South/South dialogue among women should be promoted, especially regarding the impact of international trade and macroeconomic policies, in particular, their formulation and implementation. African women should also call into question, the liberalization and globalization agenda by building civil society's understanding of the issues and by bringing about mass mobilization in a global, regional and coordinated fashion'. (Pheko, 2002, p. p.105)

VIII. Conclusion

³ World Bank, 2000, **World Development Indicators, 2000**, New York, OUP.

⁴ UNDP, 1999, Human Development Report, New York. UNDP.

African feminist inquiries have articulated the strong link between Western neo-liberalism and European domination that are implicated in colonial oppression and corporate globalization and bolstered by racist ideologies and institutions.

There is a need for a revisionist analysis of external concepts, canonical theories, methodologies and paradigms that have distorted gender studies in Africa. There is also a need to critically examine gendered readings of mainstream research of the West in the fields of science, history, the social sciences and the academy from an African perspective. There is also a need for an African feminism that will reflect the paradigmatic complexity of gender research in Africa.

African feminism, as I define a brand of it, operates within a global political economy in which sexism cannot be isolated from the larger political economy and economic processes responsible for the exploitation and oppression of both men and women. The result is kind of feminism that is transformative in human and social rather than in personal, individualistic and sexist terms. (Steady, 1981). Given this orientation, the following are among important research questions to be asked.

- ?? How does an academic context shaped by the injustices of the Transatlantic Slavery, colonialism and imperialism and justified by racist and sexist stereotypes and myths about Africa and Africans, affect gender research in Africa?
- ?? How relevant is the Eurocentric search for universal women's oppression when other forms of oppression based on race, nationalism, ethnicity, class and so forth and by the global economy of whole nations and peoples threaten the very existence of most Africans?
- ?? How do the pressures of globalization and the market economy impact on social institutions such as marriage, the family, male/female relations and positive and negative cultural practices?
- ?? How has the donor community influenced the research agenda of Africa and distorted African realities based on preconceived assumptions and biases?
- ?? How do we deepen our understanding of the importance of matrifocal traditions of Africa of which Diop wrote and the dynamic interplay between these traditions and patriarchal systems, especially the modernization of patriarchal domination through globalization?
- ?? How is the link between women's roles in production and reproduction significant in understanding the continuities between the public and the private spheres and in the context of a rapidly changing political economy and a socio-cultural crisis of major proportions?
- ?? How are gender relations in the domestic sphere supporting or impeding women's decision-making and control over their lives?
- ?? To what extent are African women's bodies becoming commercialized, and a potential target for trafficking and violence, in the age of globalization?
- ?? How is the HIV/AIDS epidemic affecting notions of sexuality, fertility, gender relations, well-being and collective survival in Africa?

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