



The Challenges of Feminism: Gender, Ethics and Responsible Academic Freedom in African Universities

Amina Mama*

Abstract

Feminist theory and ethics have enormous potentials to transform and energize the discourse on academic freedom and social responsibility. As a theory of knowledge and an intellectual practice, feminism deconstructs the epistemological foundations of patriarchy and contributes to the emancipation of women as subjects and studies on and about women as critical intellectual engagements. Despite this potential, the discourse on academic freedom and intellectual responsibility in African universities has rarely yielded ground for feminist ethics, and feminist intellectuals within the universities have had to struggle for space. This article discusses these struggles to insert feminism as part of the intellectual discourse on academic freedom within Africa's scholarly community between 1990 – the year of the Academic Freedom Conference in Kampala – and 2010. The institutional and intellectual challenges that have been encountered by feminist-inspired academics are highlighted. Finally, the author discusses the imperatives to move the discourse on gender in African scholarly communities beyond the normative policy rhetoric to tackling the gendered configuration of academic institutions.

Résumé

La théorie et l'éthique féministes ont un potentiel énorme pour transformer et animer le débat sur les libertés académiques et la responsabilité sociale. En tant que théorie de la connaissance et pratique intellectuelle, le féminisme déconstruit les fondations épistémologiques de la patriarchie et contribue

* University of California, Davis. Email: amama@ucdavis.edu

au discours de l'émancipation de la femme tout en étudiant son engagement intellectuel critique. En dépit de cette potentialité, le débat sur les libertés académiques et la responsabilité intellectuelle dans les universités africaines a à peine généré les fondements de l'éthique féministe, et les intellectuels féministes ont dû batailler dur pour trouver leur espace. Cet article discute de ces luttes pour la cause de l'insertion du féminisme dans le discours intellectuel sur les libertés académiques au sein de la communauté intellectuelle africaine entre 1990 – année de la Conférence académique sur les libertés académiques tenue à Kampala – et 2010. L'article met donc en relief les défis que les intellectuels féministes ont eu à affronter. In fine, l'article discute des impératives dictées par la nécessité de placer le débat sur le genre en milieu académique africain au-delà de la rhétorique politique normative pour la matérialisation d'une configuration basée sur le genre dans les institutions académiques.

Introduction

Feminism challenges us at very many levels; and as an intellectual politics, it also faces many challenges. It is a call to freedom, in an era where there is generally 'less freedom in the air' than there seemed to be twenty years ago. Feminism, put simply, refers to the ongoing struggle to free women from centuries of oppression, exploitation and marginalization in all the vast majority of known human societies. It is a call to end patriarchy and to expose, deconstruct and eradicate all the myriad personal, social, economic and political practices, habits and assumptions that sustain gender inequality and injustice around the world. Feminism seeks nothing less than the transformation of our institutions, including our knowledge institutions. The widespread manifestations of feminism in and beyond the global academy has had resonance in the African social science community too, touching the personal, professional and political lives of many, especially those accepting the importance of gender equity to democracy and freedom. Others still choose to ignore gender, or insist on its irrelevance in their scholarly work, despite the limitations this imposes on their basic understanding of almost all social, political and economic phenomena. As a trans-disciplinary intellectual paradigm, feminism was pushed into the consciousness of Africa's mainstream scholarly community 20 years ago, well into the UN Decade for Women, Peace and Development. Needless to say, both feminist movements and gender equity policy discourses were already quite widespread in the region. CODESRIA'S first public engagement with gender was the 1991 workshop on 'Gender Analysis and African Social Science', held in Dakar, just a year after the interventions of several then-young feminist scholars at the Kampala Conference on 'Academic Freedom' (Imam and Mama 1995).

In this article, I will trace the role and contribution of feminism as a liberating paradigm within Africa's scholarly community between 1990 – the year of the academic freedom conference – and 2010. I will highlight some of the institutional and intellectual challenges that have been encountered by feminist-inspired academics who have for years worked for gender equity in the institutional and intellectual cultures of African universities. Today, this struggle is still on but feminists are now concerned to push beyond the already normative policy rhetoric on gender equity, demanding the translation of expressed vision and mission statements into practical changes in the gendered configuration of academic institutions. Through gender and women's studies, feminist scholars have also tackled gendered teaching and research practices that persist in the scholarship and pedagogy. The fact is that twenty years on, gender hierarchies continue to hamper women's full and equal participation in the intellectual life of the continent. So pervasive are these that gender-competent women scholars often find it necessary to locate in gender studies programmes, or leave the academy if they insist on working with gender as a major analytic trope, let alone pursue women's freedom and equality. Meanwhile, gender and women's studies has grown and spread its influence as a scholarly field; but as Pereira (FA 1) observes, it exists in a parallel universe, while the mainstream scholarship continues to display androcentrism and an unwillingness to engage with gender, and indeed many of the other social divisions that organize our societies. The concept of intersectionality is now widely embraced within gender and women's studies, as a means addressing the fact that gender works not as an isolatable variable, but through its pervasive interconnections with class, ethnicity, clan, religious, race, sexuality and nation. In the same way, these other dimensions of social order also work through gender – so that, for example, nationalism is always gendered, class variations affect women and men differently, and so on. Major theoretical developments in the field of gender and women's studies globally as well as in Africa, make it incumbent on us to critically reflect on the state of gender and feminism, and the strategies that have been pursued to advance gender equity and other related aspects of social justice so far.

Twenty years almost to the day, CODESRIA's first major international conference on 'Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibility in Africa', was held in Kampala in November 1990. It was a memorable occasion for all those who attended. For many of us (myself included) at a much early stage in our scholarly careers, it was an exhilarating discovery of the region's most significant social research network – CODESRIA. It was inspiring enough for me to promptly resign my lectureship at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, and return home to Nigeria, intent on joining colleagues in the work of building independent intellectual spaces – notably the innocuously-named Cen-

tre for Research and Documentation in Kano, critically analyzing the impact of sustained military rule on Nigerian society and all its institutions. The second such space we were able to open up took the form of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria, dedicated to strengthening locally-grounded and relevant teaching and research in gender and women's studies for Nigeria's vast population of students. It is somewhat ironic that both of these – like CODESRIA itself, and several of its affiliates – were set up independently, that is to say outside the university space. There were similar developments elsewhere on the continent. Previously, Claude Ake and his colleagues established the Centre for Advanced Social Research in Port Harcourt, while in Uganda, Mahmood Mamdani and his colleagues set up the Centre for Basic Research, and the Southern African Research body SAPES Trust was already set up in Zimbabwe. In those days, these centres marked a concerted effort to keep independent scholarly research alive in the beleaguered context of universities that were being divested, and subjected to state surveillance and direct intervention. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that even before the initiation of independent centres and institutes, feminist research centres had been established, in order to create interdisciplinary spaces for work that was not favourably received within mainstream disciplines and departments. The Women's Research and Documentation Project was established at Dar es Salaam, initially as a study group in 1980, a whole decade before the Kampala conference. The Women's Research and Documentation Centre was also established at University of Ibadan soon after, to be followed with the establishment of many more gender and women's studies units, as discussed elsewhere (Boswell 2003).

As my colleagues have observed, by 1990 the universities were already experiencing crisis and divestment, just two years after the World Bank had outraged us all by asserting – on the erroneous basis of cost-return analysis – that Africa could not afford universities, only basic education. It was also the time at which independent scholarly networks and centres were assuming greater importance, particularly with regard to questions of academic freedom and social responsibility. Many of us have remained committed to ensuring that the basic consensus articulated in the Kampala Declaration would be made a reality in Africa. This was not a liberal Western notion of individual freedom, but a notion that located academics within their social and historic responsibilities for the freedom of the entire continent's people.

The Kampala conference defined the meaning of 'academic freedom' away from old the West's imposed notion of individualism and individual rights, Africanizing it by locating it within the region's broad imperatives for freedom of thought. While the debates were heated, largely because of

concerns over radical movements and the public good, to achieve consensus academic freedom was defined along with social responsibility, to accommodate the strong commitment that Africa's academics express toward being engaged and active in their societies, and not removed or elevated above the people (e.g., Ki Zerbo 1995). Regional experience has us locating 'academic' freedom firmly as just an aspect of the much broader freedom struggle – for broader freedom of all African people – women, men and children. We reminded ourselves that education is not an elite indulgence, but a public good, offering an important route to freedom and progress for Africa's oppressed and marginalized majorities. This public interest drove all the struggles that were waged to establish Africa's post-colonial institutions as inclusive, modern and to hold them responsible – not to any particular regime – but to the public; the women and men of Africa. Indeed, it has been argued that women – because of their historic status and roles as women – have always been particularly invested in African universities.¹

The Kampala conference spent a lot of time on the oppressive role that many governments of the day played in censoring freedom of thought; but it also highlighted the role of civil society, in the form of religious fundamentalist groups, claims made in the name of 'culture' as if culture were not always contested, and by conservative social institutions and other non-state actors. We did not spare ourselves either – the late Claude Ake presented an ascerbic self-criticism of academics, chastising scholars for renegeing on our responsibilities. He argued compellingly that our role was one of constantly working to demystify and challenge the complex machinations of a global capitalist system that was not favourable to Africa's interests or the pursuit of democratization. At the Kampala conference, Ayesha Imam and I wished to present a paper on the manner in which gender inequalities curb academic freedom, particularly of women. This was a controversial idea apparently, because it 'did not fit' as a topic of its own, so we negotiated to present a paper that would address gender through the rather awkward but workable trope of 'self-censorship'. To make this work for our subject matter, we therefore focused on the self-censorship exhibited by a male-dominated scholarly community that was reluctant to take gender seriously, regarding this as 'private matter' that had nothing to do with serious academic work. Perhaps because of the focus on the state, there was an aversion to addressing the private sphere, despite the fact that the social contract between civil society and the state, itself relies profoundly on the gender division of labour that constructed women as wives reproducing the labour force day to day and across generations, while men were public citizens.² There was already a mass of evidence that we had ignored the gender dynamics of colonization and underdevelopment at our peril

(Boserup 1980). It was also clear that even our purportedly ‘liberal’ universities, though these had not excluded women, were nonetheless heavily male-dominated, with formal and informal power residing in old-boys networks that made them very difficult places for women to navigate. We addressed gender injustice in the academy through the trope of self-censorship, in order for it to be included in the conference at all. Today, in the liberalized universities, gender inequalities have persisted even though there are more women entering universities than ever before. The state is still directly oppressive in some countries, but there are many that have transited to civilian rule and less overt forms of suppression. New forces threaten academic freedom, most of these to do with the divestment and commodification of higher education. These have been best documented by Mamdani, in his case study of Makerere University, heralded as the success story of higher education reform. He outlines the impact of neoliberal policies on the main curriculum, and on resources and space for any kind of independent research. With the changed landscape, new forms of self-censorship have also emerged to threaten academic freedom. The most obvious threats are financially-driven, and reflect the continued underdevelopment of African states and economies. In 1990, we discussed the consultancy syndrome as posing a threat to freedom. Today this is an even more pronounced threat, as economic needs and interests lead academics across the age spectrum to choose doing consultancies for various agencies over the unpaid and underfunded struggle to mobilize resources (including equally underpaid colleagues) for independent research. Unless they can draw on other sources of income, academics are under pressure to effectively become self-employed alongside their day-jobs, or to moonlight in the newly established for-profit and faith-based institutions mushrooming around national universities. The situation has become even direr with the reduction and reconfiguration of donor funding. So today, more than ever, the public higher education system itself – still the major provider of higher education all over Africa – must be defended even more ardently, in the name of academic freedom and social responsibility.

This is all the more challenging in the context of major shifts in governance and surveillance that are detailed in contemporary studies of institutions, discourses and practices. If these new lines of social theory are to be taken seriously, it might make better sense to discuss the ways in which individualism has advanced to such a level that we might be more accurate to reconsider academics more as atomized, self-regulating and self-governing subjects, reduced to pursuing self-interest instead of living the professional lives of socially responsible citizens. Building spaces for shared intellectual work and radical scholarship has become an action which the neoliberal university and the majority of its inhabitants do not have any space, resources or time for. What could be a greater constraint on academic freedom?

Twenty years ago, scholars who challenged androcentrism encountered strong collegial and institutional resistance, and many feminist academics paid high social and professional costs for their trouble. Some were subjected to smear campaigns, threats and even outright violent attack for propagating new ideas and concepts, as Ebrima Sall was later to document (Sall 2000). Being identified as a 'feminist' was considered incompatible with being a sound scholar. This led to the pragmatic adoption of the term 'gender analysis' and emphasis the powerful analytic value it adds to social theory. This also made our male colleagues a little less uncomfortable than discussion's about women's studies, feminism or the transformation of gender relations, which most of us actually pursue – as vision, as epistemology, as methodology, and as a trans-disciplinary framework that is integrated throughout all stages of research processes.

In 1990, less attention was paid to the ubiquitous forces of economic neoliberalism that have since radically altered higher education landscapes across Africa (Oanda et al., 2008; Mamdani 2007; Zeleza 2006, etc).³ Although the SAPs were already being imposed all over the region at great human cost, I do not think many of us realized the extent to which market forces were going to ravage our public institutions, marginalizing serious considerations of social justice and virtually eradicating social protection. State collapse, conflicts and the combined monetization and militarization of politics are just three of the outcomes of this reconfiguration of the state, market, society relationships. The widespread effects of corporate-led globalization processes on public spaces for critical reflection within higher education institutions have been dire. Africa's mainstream academies have never been particularly tolerant of dissent, the debates about social responsibility and the imperative of serving our beleaguered communities and a pan African ideal of the public good. Long before Kampala, decolonization processes saw Africa's public demanding more access to higher education, and even military regimes invested in the establishment of several hundred new and public institutions, thus materializing popular aspirations.

Contemporary global processes have had gender-differentiated effects on our societies, and it is this that has been the primary work undertaken under the rubric of gender studies. The fact is that poverty and economic underdevelopment cannot be discussed intelligently without reference to the synergies between local and global gender dynamics, as it is these that have facilitated the feminization of poverty, the proclivity for all-male military rule and armed conflict, and or Africa's particular gendered epidemiology of sexually transmitted HIV-AIDS.⁴ Such realities cannot be seriously addressed without reference to endemic tolerance of gender-based violence, or the exacerbation of

these normalized injustices in times of conflict, as seen in the widespread evidence of misogyny manifest in practices of rape, mutilation against women and girls. The fact that violence against women and girls manifests along ethnicized, classed and factionalized lines, and in peace-time as well as in periods of conflict is obscured by the new global discourse on 'rape as a weapon of war', but never lost in post-colonial African feminist analysis.

Colleagues have challenged us by asking: What has changed in the two decades that have passed since 1990? Clearly a great deal has changed. Our colleagues have all observed the seriousness of a situation in which great swathes of Africa have remained impoverished and deprived of peace, basic needs and human security. In such contexts, it is hard to create the space, never mind the freedom, to think. Yet without intellectual capability no nation or region can protect its interests, or escape being doomed to dependency and underdevelopment. Mkandawire was succinct when he noted, "We cannot develop in ignorance". I reject the "fully belly" thesis on freedom, which suggests that we should postpone addressing matters of gender, ethnicity, religiosity until 'basic needs' have been fulfilled. This thesis is still used to discredit feminism's liberating potential, when in fact it can speak very loudly to the fate of the silenced majority of impoverished, excluded and marginalized women in Africa. The appropriations of gender discourse by international financial institutions (IFIs), military regimes, and bureaucracies should not mystify us, or be used to discredit the independent women's movements whose activism and critical analysis has obliged such structures to engage with the discourse and effectively neutralize its radical potential.

In today's context, the universities – still privileged albeit increasingly precarious spaces for relative freedom to think and reflect on the world – have been severely compromised. In some contexts, the state continues to engage in direct suppression, intimidation and detention of critical thinkers. Both media and academia are further imperiled by the commodification of research and information, and the accompanying withdrawal of donor funding that was enabling us to sustain limited but strategically significant spaces for intellectual freedom, in the form of the small institutes and networks noted above. Meanwhile, many higher education institutions have virtually ceased to support independent research activity, leaving academics to search for grants on individualized basis that offers little leverage with regard to the intellectual agendas that one might wish to pursue. Particularly imperiled is exactly the kind and quality of research needed for effective approaches to development, democratization and social justice – and this includes all the social sciences and humanities, within which most gender studies, development studies and political economy are located. Scientific training and research is heavily dependent on and driven by external agendas and funding. Teaching curricula have also been

affected with the neo-liberal focus on technical and vocational skills training and preparation for the imaginary 'global marketplace'. What this actually means is that the teaching of socio-historical analysis or critical thinking and theory have been marginalized and depleted. Within gender studies this trend manifests in an emphasis on technicist approaches that service the development industry: 'gender planning', 'gender training' and 'gender mainstreaming' displace the feminist intellectual project of rigorous feminist theories and critical perspectives on modernization, development, bureaucracy, social policy, politics, the patriarchal state and economics, and of course feminist strategies for conscientization, mobilization and women's freedom, as a key aspect of democracy. Academic survival practices – the quest for private contracts and other problematic transactions and exchanges (some of them highly gendered and sexual in character) – erode intellectual integrity on many campuses, making it harder and harder to maintain professionalism. Overall, Africa's intellectual capability remains endangered, just at the time when we need it most – in an increasingly high-tech world in which scientific and technological transformations have also given rise to increasingly complex systems of governance, regulation and surveillance that we need to demystify and engage, lest we be further marginalized in the challenging years that lie ahead.

Are academics free-thinking enough to play their historic role and serve as defenders of freedom? What are the conditions under which a freedom ethic can be sustained? More specifically, under what conditions and in what spaces has it been possible to pursue feminist scholarly ethics that seek to make it clear that gender equality is a public right and a good thing? What has the last 20 years of feminist scholarship contributed to academic freedom in general, and for women? I would like to suggest that feminism, while still very much a minority movement in Africa's scholarly arenas has established itself as an intellectual frontier – an experimental laboratory for integrating ethics and social responsibility into scholarship. This has been possible because feminist scholarship originates in a movement that does not accept traditional divisions between scholarship and radical movements, but actively works to bring these together, in the practice of what we can refer to as activist scholarship.

Feminist Ethics, Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility

Ethics are a set of values and principles that serve as a moral compass between what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. Feminist ethics focus on the realization of equality and justice for women in all spheres of life, ending patriarchy and all its practices, transforming institutions. A feminist ethic is rooted in a vision of the world in which women are no longer oppressed or marginalized or subjected to male violence and

intimidation. I would suggest that such an ethic is integral to the pursuit of freedom, and part and parcel of the ethic of social responsibility that men share with women, as people. There are signs that this is understood, to the extent that university mission statements have tried to align with constitutional and legal commitments to basic rights and gender equality in many African countries; but there is also good evidence that we are still far short of realizing an ethic of gender equality in malestream scholarly arenas.

Feminism in the scholarly arena has tackled gender inequality in two major areas – the institutional and the intellectual. In addressing scholarly institutions – feminists and their allies working within universities and research networks have struggled to eradicate unfair policies and numerical imbalances for many years (Bennett, Pereira, Kasente and others in FA1 2002; Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, Phiri and others in Sall 2000). We have also sought to transform prevailing patriarchal institutional cultures which discriminate against and disempower women and constrain their intellectual freedom through normative ideas and assumptions and discriminatory, oppressive and abusive practices.

Secondly, feminism addresses intellectual transformation by challenging and demystifying androcentrism in scholarship. This has been pursued using the tools of feminist research and gender analysis that demystify the manner in which mainstream teaching and research contribute. Gender analysis shows how these are predisposed to perpetuate patriarchal assumptions ideologies and ideas which sustain gender inequality and the oppression of women through scholarship. Feminist intellectual work thus has import far beyond the academy, as it seeks changes in the core business of the universities: the production and reproduction of an intelligentsia of people imbued with values and ideas – through teaching, and the production of knowledge itself – through research. Feminists in the academy have dedicated much effort towards creating the conditions that will allow women the freedom to pursue scholarly careers on an equal basis with men. In an unequal world in which leaving things alone pertinently has never seen inequality ‘wither away’ as liberals have suggested it would, it is activists who pioneer positive action to address the imbalances that hold women back and bring about change.

A feminist ethic in the academy seeks to transform knowledge production. It speaks to the social responsibility of universities as public institutions, delivering public goods, being tasked with producing the next generation:

...if the universities remain difficult and unequal places for women, what kinds of male and female citizens are they turning out? (FA8 2007:6)

Twenty years ago the world of African scholarship was a different place. Within gender relations in scholarly institutions, as I shall discuss below, it has often been the case of *plus ça change, plus ça la meme chose*.

The context is one in which feminism has wrought significant changes in our social and political landscapes. The last two decades have seen feminist movements continue to grow and spread across the public arenas of the world, responding to the negative effects of globalization, religious fundamentalism, economic neo-liberalism and militarism. This has been most visible in global governance and international development arenas, but African women have also mobilized in local and national public spheres. The case of Rwanda becoming the first nation on earth to have more than 50 per cent women elected to the Parliament raises new challenges, as does that of Liberia electing of the continent's first woman president.⁵ Women's movements and the internationalization of feminism may have played a role in these changes, but clearly the systemic challenges do not end with these gains, which are in any case far from typical across the continent. Several of the nations that have transited to some kind of electoral democracy have actually seen decreases in the representation of women (e.g., Ghana) while others have seen minimal change, as women in politics still face much resistance and many personal risks.

The African women's movement, with its historical focus on the state, has made dramatic inroads in the political and public policy arenas. It is unfortunate that the global context has been such that many of the gains have been undermined by the broader erosion of the public sector, but that should not detract from the advances that women have made. In any case, beyond this, women remain very active in civil society and nonprofit work, as well as in unprotected places where the public sector has ceased to exist. We see this in war zones, and in the many places where there is social unrest and violent conflict. Women play critical roles in sustaining and rebuilding shattered communities, tackling the challenges of peace-building and redefining security to include security of livelihoods and an end to sexual violence and abuse in peacetime. Today, even the remotest rural communities and the most devastated post-conflict zones display diverse mobilizations of women articulating demands for their rights in political, social and economic spheres. As corporate and militarized modes of globalization have gained ascendancy, women have formed myriad transnational and trans-regional networks that struggle against the economic, social, cultural and political manifestations of gender injustice and inequality in the context of globalization and continuing underdevelopment.

Women entering and pursuing careers in African universities draw on the experience of transnational feminist movements, for strategies, research methodologies and pedagogies. As noted above, since the early 1980s activist scholars

have been creating and defending independent spaces for feminist-inspired, collaborative intellectual work, no matter how small.⁶ While many of these are under-resourced and poorly staffed and rely on high levels of voluntarism from women faculty and students, they do foster a sense of intellectual freedom and social responsibility to women beyond the academy. They work to sustain and reanimate feminist teaching and research on Africa's campuses, offering a more visionary antidote to the narrow market demand for technicist training, and they offer a safe and supportive environment to scholars (men as well as women) who wish to pursue feminist theoretical and methodological advances in their scholarship, or address subject matter too controversial for mainstream disciplinary departments.

What conditions have generated these mobilizations for intellectual freedom for women in the academy? The research that has been carried out as part of this intellectual mobilization finds that universities – for all their liberal pretensions – sustain and reproduce gender inequalities. In recent times, they have proved to be unremarkably resistant to any kind of change that does not offer short-term monetary profit.

Gender in the Institutional Culture of Africa's Universities – Towards an Organizational Ethic of Gender Responsibility⁷

Observers have pointed out that African universities have never formally excluded women (e.g., Ajayi et al., 1996). This being so, what are the conditions that have sustained gender inequality within them?

Twenty years ago, it was still common to deny that universities were gendered institutions that favoured men and marginalized women. Largely male administrators could insist that the universities were 'gender neutral' places, and that 'gender inequality' was something imported from outside – located in homes, schools and culture (Ajayi et al., 1996). This perspective served to justify inaction and resist affirmative action (Mama 2003). Regrettably, there are still many who deny any responsibility for gender inequality within universities themselves. However, this denial can no longer be sustained, in the face of the evidence that universities *do* play a role in maintaining, and not challenging, gender inequality (Mama 2000; FA 8 and FA 9 2007).

In 1999, the male dominance in universities in Africa was still pronounced – more than 90 per cent of their staff and 80 per cent of teachers were men (Otunga and Ojwang 2003, cited in Barnes 2007), a situation that did not radically change in decade that followed (FA 8 and 9; Tefera and Altbach 2006). To date, fewer than 8 per cent of vice-chancellors in Africa's universities are women. A similar imbalance characterizes the professoriate. Nonetheless, there have been some incremental gains in the representation of women

among faculty and student populations, although this is unevenly distributed, remaining concentrated at the lowest levels of the hierarchy and in less prestigious areas, even within particular fields of scholarship. In other words, the broad pattern of both horizontal and vertical stratification has persisted (Mama 2003). This is not surprising, given the evidence that inequalities are sustained by the fact that clearly gendered institutional cultures and practices favour men and disadvantage women, and men are still resistant to change.

The AGI study on gender in Africa's universities documents patriarchal, even misogynistic institutional and intellectual cultures replete with practices that subject women scholars to various forms of intimidation, harassment and coercion (*Feminist Africa*, 8 & 9), thus confirming and extending previous work (Sall 2000; FA 8, FA 9; Pereira 2001; Kwesiga 2006; Pereira 2007; Magubane et al., 2004; Pillay 2007). In addition, several yet-to-be-published doctoral theses have been written on gender and higher education.

The research that the GICAU team carried out on six campuses further details a plethora of patriarchal social practices, male-biased institutional procedures, academic promotional inequities and gendered (at times sexualized) gate-keeping practices. It also reveals some of the everyday normative assumptions that are made about women in academic life, and how these operate to systematically sustain men's domination, and at times work against efforts to develop policies that might favour the emergence of more equitable institutional cultures and systems. These gender dynamics operate to make it much harder for women – especially young women, rural women and women from ethnically marginalized communities – to succeed. Barnes sums it up:

..these institutions have been places “of the new-men for the new-men.”
...African universities should not be seen as static, gender-neutral spaces to which women have been benignly and invisibly added. Rather, these spaces and places are intricately marked with codes for man-as-thinker, man-as-aggressive-debater, man-as-athlete, boys-becoming-men, etc. The addition of women to this men's club is thus not only a statistical, but also an extremely meaningful social and symbolic exercise – which is by its very nature, dynamic, challenging, and likely conflicted (Barnes 2007:12).

Faculty

The GICAU researchers point to:

...the persisting perception that real academics are male, the practice of giving more challenging and higher profile jobs to men, the continuing expectation that women would play domestic and ceremonial roles at work, and the subjection of those who did not conform to these norms to ridicule and disapproval... Female faculty are routinely called “Auntie” and “Mama” while their male counterparts are addressed by titles signifying their academic achievements...reinforced the maternal and wifely roles expected

of women...The most difficult aspect of the institutional culture was the denial of the existence of gender discrimination (Tsikata 2007:36).

Faculty who carry out gender research are not exempt from gender oppression, as over the years we have seen many occasions on which student groups, the media and other religious and social groups in the wider society threatened women faculty who have published or said things that challenge sexual discrimination and harassment.⁸⁸ Penda Mbow experienced this at the hands of civil society in Senegal; Isabel Phiri also at the University of Malawi (both reported in Sall 2000). More recently, Sylvia Tamale, Dean of Law at Makerere and a well known feminist scholar, has repeatedly been subjected to media hate campaigns for defending the rights of marginalized women, and for speaking out against moves to further criminalize gays and lesbians in Uganda by the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity and the US-inspired evangelical Member of Parliament, David Bahati.

Students

Women students often face physical insecurity, intimidation, verbal abuse and harassment in dormitories, dining rooms, libraries, lecture halls, and within student associations. This needs to be clearly distinguished from mutually enjoyable flirtations, and relationships, as part of the problem that these are often blurred in masculine/heteronormative discourses and perceptions of women and women's sexuality.

The team investigating the University of Addis describes the methodological challenges of even gathering information in a climate of fear, and the systematic silencing of women students pushed to sit at the back of lecture halls and remain silent, and to enter the cafeteria for meals only after male students have finished eating.

My friends went early and stood in front of the line in the cafeteria. They were severely harassed. The implicit rule is that female students are supposed to line up around 1pm when most of the male students have already eaten. There were other implicit rules which barred female students from going to the student café and the student lounge. One day we went to call someone at the student café and we had to turn back when all the male students stared at us. Sometimes refusal by female students to go out ends in disastrous situations. For instance a girl by the name of Sosina Berhe was killed by a male classmate when she refused to go out with him (Tadesse in AGI, Unpublished 2007:10).

Women have to be exceptional to make it through to graduation, and for them to prove that they are exceptions to the rule of gender inequality, and also the negative prospect of their achievements being dismissed as having been rigged by the provision of sexual favours to lecturers. Women students

who refuse sexual advances are failed or threatened with failure; and when appeals for redress are made to faculty, they either fall on deaf ears or are ridiculed.

Overcrowding and under-resourcing have intensified the situation. Resurgent religiosity has worked against women's academic freedom, as brotherhoods of various creeds dictate the dress styles and demand passivity, silence and servitude from women students, and ensure they are not allowed into leadership positions (Odejide 2007; Diaw 2007).

Twenty years after the authors of the Kampala Declaration resisted the suggestion that gender discrimination needed to be specifically mentioned, it is clear that women's intellectual freedom both inside and beyond the academic arenas demands specific interventions, as denying the problem has only frustrated efforts to address it. Today, even the most recalcitrant leaders of these institutions cannot claim not to know that gender is a persisting feature of academic life. A persistent and growing pool of scholars and activists has ensured that they continue to feel the pressure to acknowledge the problem, even if they are slow to follow through on action to redress the problem.

Other Institutional Responses

Since Kampala, there have been many other initiatives that have tried to address the overwhelming male domination of Africa's scholarly institutions. As noted above, CODESRIA in 1991 hosted the first major conference on 'Gender and the African Social Sciences' attended by more women than any other previous conference. Follow-up to this has included the hosting of a regular gender institute and several recent workshops on gender held in Cairo over the last few years. A small gender task force was set up to try and institutionalize expressed commitments to greater inclusion of women in CODESRIA projects. And it is clear that CODESRIA, OSSREA and other mainstream bodies no longer ignore the need to both include more critically-minded women in their programmes and activities, and encourage more men to carry out critical gender studies, as several of our colleagues have already taken up the challenge with good results. Important moments include 1991, when at the end of the first gender conference the then Executive Secretary of CODESRIA acknowledged the existence of "a corpus of gender studies, methodologies and research in Africa". Not long after, SAPES published the first continental book on Gender Research Methods (Meena 1992, ed). These examples owe something to the fact that donors have made resources available to these networks for gender research, but it does also speak to the growth of the field of gender studies within the region. It

is to be hoped that the upcoming generation will take this a great deal further both in research and activism to bring about change within our institutions.

Intellectual Challenges: Feminist Ethics in Research and Teaching

Over the last decade and a half, the African Gender Institute (established in 1996) has played a particular role in efforts to strengthen feminist research, and in contrast to the mainstream networks, it has not shied away from supporting women-only initiatives. The central feature of the feminist research ethic that has been developed by the AGI and the associated network of feminist scholars has been the insistence on developing socially transformative approaches to research, notably by maintaining the link between scholarship and activism. Beginning with a regional agenda-setting workshop in 2000, the AGI has convened a series of specialized gender studies curriculum-strengthening and methodology workshops, and initiated ongoing feminist research and publication and dissemination initiatives. The communication and dissemination challenges facing feminist scholars in the African region have been responded to with the establishment of a continental resource website (www.gwsafrica.com) and an accredited scholarly journal of gender studies, *Feminist Africa*, initiated in 2000, and now in its 14th issue (www.feministafrica.org).

Perhaps the AGI's most significant strategy has involved intellectual networking aimed at overcoming the atomization and isolation of researchers that has stymied the emergence of coherent bodies of work. The intention has been to build an intellectually coherent community dedicated to developing feminist methodologies suited to the particular challenges of gender in diverse African contexts. The ultimate goal has been to strengthen collective capacity to a level that might generate paradigm shifts. The various projects and initiatives that have ensued have facilitated mutual support and strengthening of the existing and emerging feminist scholars and GWS centres by bringing them into a collegial network. The network is supported by a membership-based list-serve, and all members receive hard copy of the journal *FA* and are encouraged to become users of and contributors to it. Indeed, it is through participation in the various activities that relationships of solidarity, support and mutual learning have been formed and consolidated to a level that did not exist previously.

The idea of activist scholarship being a form of collective action – or activist scholarship being central to contemporary feminist scholarship in the region – may well be its most distinguishing feature. A key example of this work has been the extensive action research and capacity-building work

undertaken to address sexual harassment and abuse of women in southern African tertiary institutions, identified earlier on as a major constraint to women's academic freedom. This has included the establishment of a dedicated network, the production of a training manual and resource book (Bennett et al.) and workshopping of the experiences of policy implementation across campuses (Bennett et al., 200). The Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria has subsequently initiated a similar research project on Nigeria's university campuses. Other key projects have included the Gender and Institutional Cultures Project (cited above), curriculum and research initiative designed to develop locally-rooted feminist theorizations and analyses of sexuality in teaching and research. This initiative stimulated other new studies in the field of sexuality, including the establishment of the law and sexuality research project in the Faculty of Law at Makerere, and transnational collaborative work on the teaching curriculum.

Activist Research

The editorial to an issue of *FA* dedicated to question of methodology was aptly titled 'Research for Life: Paradigms and Power'. Jane Bennett succinctly laid out the challenges facing us:

A key challenge for African feminists remains the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contests in which we live and work and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action. Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its own right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers... (Bennett 2008:1).

The notion of activist research is not new to Africa by any means, nor is it unique to feminists in Africa (see Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009). Social and political movements have always had to engage with the power-knowledge relation by taking knowledge and knowledge production of all kinds seriously. However, it is clear that the level of social engagement that is being advocated by feminist researchers goes very much farther in its definition of social responsibilities than conventional scholarly paradigms and methods have ever done.

Existing feminist research practice in various African contexts can be characterized in three broad tropes:

research *on* activism – studies of social movements, women's movements and all forms of activism;

research *for* activism – services activist agendas; works to inform and support the lobbying, advocacy, training and development interventions of feminist organizations and movements (policy analysis action research);

research *as* activism that in and of itself generates/inspires/stimulates and is direct action – participatory action research methods that share at various stages of the research process – from conceptualization to dissemination to the activation of the research.

Each of these has been pursued using a variety of tools, many drawn from conventional training in research methods. However, these are invariably improvised, and many research methods that we actually used have been generated in the course of conducting research in African contexts. This is because the conventional understanding of research – and the methods developed to carry out research presume conditions that are not only largely imaginary, but rooted in Western assumptions about the nature of the state and society, and indeed gender relations, that simply do not apply here. At the very least, they assume a level of stability and systemic coherence that does not characterize many postcolonial African contexts. The conditions under which research is carried out include political instability and authoritarianism, resource scarcity, situations of extreme poverty and economic insecurity, costs and difficulties of communication and transportation, poor infrastructure, vast distances of all kinds, and even conditions of conflict and insecurity. These prevailing conditions are unstable rather than stable, and have made many research methods irrelevant or impossible to use in any textbook fashion. Where particular methods (e.g., large-scale surveys, interviews or oral histories) have been used, these have had to be improvised, at times quite drastically, and feminists are not alone in having developed a huge pool of experience in the area of methodology.

Quite apart from the conditions (cultural as well as political and economic), the paucity of funding has also meant that large-scale quantitative studies have become a rarity, as doing these effectively is prohibitively expensive, and now almost exclusively the realm of governments and international agencies.

Finally, the need for in-depth multi-disciplinary analysis of social dynamics, and for holistic theories that can help us comprehend the world better and more deeply, has led to the adoption of qualitative in-depth methods, carried out with greater intimacy and more collaborative relations with the researched communities, than traditional social science methods. In short, feminist research ethics are based on the principles of egalitarianism, mutuality and reciprocity, and are fundamentally about honouring an ethic of social responsibility and engaging positively with social change processes.

Conclusion: It is Ethically Indefensible to Neglect Gender

The contemporary global configurations of power and knowledge are more invidious and complicated than ever. What are the implications for academic freedom and social responsibility? This is a complicated and difficult question to answer.

I have focused on feminism as a major aspect of the struggle for intellectual freedom and social responsibility. I have assumed academic freedom to be inextricably bound up with broader notions of intellectual freedom, and with the liberation of our societies from centuries of marginalization and orchestrated underdevelopment, while specifically attending to the freedom struggle waged by women inspired by international and local feminisms to contribute to scholarship and knowledge production.

I conclude by observing that the still-evident malestream tendency to ignore both the persistence of gender inequity in our institutions, and the transformative potential of feminist methodologies, is ethically indefensible. It flies in the face of the accumulated evidence that gender bias and androcentrism in scholarship are 'bad science', not to mention politically anti-democratic, and socially divisive. There is ample evidence that our failure to demystify the dynamics of patriarchy has facilitated authoritarianism, and hindered the realization of democracy in Africa. Instrumentalizing, normalizing or excusing the oppression of a majority group is unhealthy for any society. It is in this context that feminist thought and methodologies offer powerful, socially and intellectually transformative tools that illuminate the ways in which this normalization of subjugation more generally occurs every day and at all levels of social reality – personal, familial, institutional, national and international.

Africa's women, Africa's poor, ethnically, religiously and variously marginalized and oppressed majorities have borne many of the costs of Eurocentric capitalist modernization paradigms and their failures. Economic growth as measured reductionistically by increases in Gross Domestic product have done little to redress inequalities, but often been accompanied by increasing the gap between rich and poor, and undermined the generation of real or sustainable development. We therefore still have a social responsibility to draw on previous social movements and bodies of radical thought and analysis to take up Claude Ake's call: to demystify the processes that have produced this situation, to challenge the powers that sustain it, and thus to radically transform all relations of inequality and injustice.

Notes

1. As noted elsewhere, one of Africa's earliest universities, the Islamic university of Al-Karaouine in the Moroccan city of Fez, was established by a woman – a wealthy philanthropist by the name of Fatima El Fihria in the year 859.
2. See Carol Pateman, 'The Sexual Contract', 1988.
3. The current situation in the University of California is a gentle iteration of the much more draconian measures imposed on Africa's still-young universities during the 1980's.
4. In African contexts HIV-AIDS is very much a heterosexual disease, with the highest infection rates among married women, and in conflict zones.
5. There have been several other women heads of state prior to the election of Sirleaf Johnson as President of Liberia, including Ruth Perry of Liberia.
6. There is a much longer history of feminist intellectualism that can be traced back to the early 20th century, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.
7. This section discusses the action research work carried out by a team of researchers that was led by myself and Teresa Barnes, under the auspices of the African Gender Institute (AGI) with support from the Association of African Universities (AAU) and VCs. Case studies were carried out by Aminata Diaw from the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Rudo Gaidzanwa at the University of Zimbabwe, Abiola Odejide at University of Ibadan, Zenebworke Tadesse at University of Addis Ababa, and Dzodzi Tsikata at the University of Ghana. It is perhaps worth noting that a) the host institution, the University of Cape Town (UCT) itself refused permission to include a case study of gender; b) the activist aspect of this project –the dissemination of the findings and development of faculty training and other interventions that would activate and respond to the findings of each case study was curtailed by the non-continuation of AAU funding once the research had been carried out. The AGI was able to publish only summaries of the final reports in *Feminist Africa* before the project was discontinued (*Feminist Africa*, Issues 8 and 9).
8. Penda Mbow experienced this at the hands of civil society in Senegal; Isabel Phiri's case at the University of Malawi (both reported in Sall 2000). More recently, Sylvia Tamale, Dean of Law at Makerere and a well known feminist scholar, has repeatedly been subjected to media hate campaigns for defending the rights of marginalized women, and for speaking out against moves to further criminalize gays and lesbians in Uganda by the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity and the US-inspired evangelical Member of Parliament, David Bahati.

References

- African Gender Institute, 2007, 'Gender and Institutional Culture in Selected African Universities', Unpublished Research Reports.
- Ajayi, J., Goma, L. and Ampah Johnson, G. eds, 1996, *The African Experience With Higher Education*, Oxford: James Currey/ Accra: Association of African Universities.
- Barnes, T., 2007, 'Politics of the Mind and Body: Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities', *Feminist Africa*, 8, pp. 8-25.
- Barnes, T. and Mama, A., 2007, Editorial: Rethinking Universities II, *Feminist Africa* 9.
- Bennett, J., 2002, 'Exploration of a "Gap": Strategizing Gender Equity in African Universities', *Feminist Africa*, 1, pp. 34-65.
- Bennett, J., ed., 2005, *Killing a Virus with Stones? Research on the Implementation of Policies Against Sexual Harassment in Southern African Higher Education*, African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town.
- Bennett, J. and Reddy, V., 2007, "'Feeling the Disconnect": Teaching Sexualities and Gender in South African Higher Education', *Feminist Africa*, 8, pp. 43-62.
- Bennett, J., 2009, 'Policies and Sexual Harassment in Higher Education: Two Steps Forward and Three Steps Somewhere Else', *Agenda* 80, pp. 7-21.
- Bertelson, E., 1998, 'The Real Transformation: The Marketization of Higher Education', *Social Dynamics*, 24 (2), pp. 130-158, University of Cape Town.
- Boswell Barbra, 2003, 'Locating Gender and Women's Studies Teaching and Research and Research Programs at Africa Universities. Gender and Women's Studies Directory, Survey Results, <http://www.gwsafrica.org/directory/survey.html>.
- Diaw, A., 2007, 'Sewing Machines and Computers? Seeing Gender in Institutional and Intellectual Cultures at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal', *Feminist Africa*, 9, pp. 5-22.
- Endeley, J.B. and Ngaling, M.N., 2007, 'Challenging Gender Inequality in Higher Education: Attitudes and Perceptions of Teaching Staff and Administrators at the University of Buea, Cameroon', *Feminist Africa*, 9, pp. 63-84.
- Ford Foundation, 2001, 'Narrative Report on the Retreat on Higher Education in Africa', Prepared by G. Hamilton, Durban, 29 May-1 June.
- Gaidzanwa, R., ed., 2001, 'Speaking for Ourselves: Masculinities and Femininities Amongst Students at the University of Zimbabwe', University of Zimbabwe Affirmative Action Project.
- Gaidzanwa, R. B., 2007, 'Alienation, Gender and Institutional Culture at the University of Zimbabwe', *Feminist Africa*, 8, pp. 60-82.
- Gherhardi, S., 1995, *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures*, London/ New Delhi: Sage. Imam, A., Mama, A. and Sow, F., 1996, *Engendering African Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA.

- Kasente, D., 2001, 'Popularising Gender: A Case Study of Makerere', University paper commissioned for FAWE and presented at 10th General Conference of the Association of African Universities, Nairobi, September.
- Kasente, D., 2002, 'Institutionalising Gender Equality in African Universities: Women's and Gender Studies at Makerere University', *Feminist Africa*, 1, pp. 91-99.
- Kwesiga, J., 2002, *Women's Access to Higher Education in Africa: Uganda's Experience*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Makhubu, L., 1998, 'The Right to Higher Education and Equal Opportunity Particularly for Women', in *Higher Education in Africa: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects*, Dakar: UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Africa.
- Mama, A., 1996, *Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa During the 1990s*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Mama, A., 2003, Editorial, *Feminist Africa* 1, 'Intellectual Politics', African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town.
- Mama, 2006, 'Feminist Studies in African Contexts: The Challenge of Transformative Teaching in African Universities', in P. Zeleza, ed., *The Study of Africa, Vol 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Mama, A. and Barnes T., 2007, 'Editorial: Rethinking Universities', *Feminist Africa* 8.
- Mamdani, M., 1993, 'Introduction: The Quest for Academic Freedom', in Mahmood Mamdani and Mamadou Diof, eds., *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series.
- Mamdani, M., 2007, *Scholars in the Marketplace; The Dilemma of Neo-liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989-2005*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Meena, R., ed, 1992, *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*. Harare: SAPES Books.
- Mkandawire, T., and Olukoshi, A., 1995, *Between Liberalization and Oppression; the Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa*, Dakar, CODESRIA Book Series.
- Manuh, T., Gariba, S. and Budu, J., 2007, *Change and Transformation in Ghana's Publicly Funded Universities*, Partnership for Higher Education, James Currey/Woeli, Accra.
- Namuddu, K., 1995, 'Gender Perspectives in the Transformation of Africa; Challenges to the African University as a Model to Society', in *Women and Higher Education in Africa*, Dakar: UNESCO.
- Oanda, I O., Fatuma, C., & Wesonga, D., 2008, *The Implications of Privatization and Private Higher Education on Access and Knowledge Production in Kenya*; CODESRIA Book Series, Dakar, Senegal.
- Odejide, O., 2007, "'What Can A Woman Do?'" Being Women in a Nigerian University'. *Feminist Africa*, 8, pp. 42-59.

- Pereira, C., 2002a, 'Structured Inequalities: A Gender Analysis of the Nigerian University System', Currently in draft form for the Case Studies of Nigerian Universities Project.
- Pereira, C., 2002, 'Between Knowing and Imagining – What Space for Feminist Scholarship on Africa?', *Feminist Africa*, 1, pp. 9-35.
- Rathberger, E., 2002, 'Women in Universities and University-Educated Women: The Current Situation in Africa', in D. Teferra and P. Altbach, eds., *African Higher Education: An International Reference Handbook*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Said, E., 1994, *Representations of the Intellectual*, London: Vintage.
- Sall, E., 2000, ed., *Women in Academia: Gender and Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Sawyer, A., 2002, 'Challenges Facing African Universities: Selected Issues', Paper presented at the 45th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington DC, 5-8 December.
- Tamale, S. and Oloka-Onyango, J., 2000, 'Bitches at the Academy: Gender and Academic Freedom in Africa', in E. Sall, *Women in Academia: Gender and Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Tsikata, D., 2007, 'Gender, Institutional Cultures and the Career Trajectories of Faculty of the University of Ghana', *Feminist Africa*, 8, pp. 26-41.
- World Bank, 2002, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, Washington DC.
- Yahya-Othman, S., 2000, 'Tanzania: Engendering Academic Freedom', in E.Sall, ed., *Women in Academia: Gender and Academic Freedom in Africa*, CODESRIA, Dakar.
- Zezeza, P., 2006, 'Introduction: The Disciplining of Africa', in P. T. Zezeza, ed., *The Study of Africa Vol. 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, Dakar: CODESRIA, pp. 1- 35.

