

# **Gender and Academic Freedom in Transforming African Universities: Some Persistent Challenges and Contradictions**

**Ibrahim Oanda Ogachi<sup>1</sup>**

**Résumé** - Les questions d'équité entre les sexes qui ont trait à la liberté académique des femmes et des féministes, comme celles concernant les étudiants et les enseignants dans les universités africaines, sont récentes. Les inégalités entre les sexes, les restrictions relatives aux libertés académiques des femmes tirent leur ancrage de la période coloniale et d'une distinction qui a associé, de manière factice, les masculinités au travail de l'esprit et les féminités au travail du corps et des émotions associées. Les efforts déployés par le mouvement des femmes et des universitaires féministes pour rendre visible les questions de genre et de liberté académique dans les universités ont dû faire face à la culture puis, décapiter la culture du néo-libéralisme dans les deux dernières décennies. Alors que le langage de la réforme et de la transformation, adoptés par la plupart des universités en Afrique portaient la promesse d'une lutte contre les inégalités entre les sexes dans l'accès physique et épistémique, ainsi que dans l'amélioration de la qualité des infrastructures, l'application des principes néolibéraux de privatisation et le marché ont érodé cette promesse. Les femmes entrent de plus en plus dans les institutions, mais à un coût plus élevé, pendant que les disciplines mettant l'accent sur les femmes et les questions de genre ont été définies comme n'étant pas assez "commercialisables" pour générer des profits pour les institutions. Cet article examine comment ces questions sont traitées dans les institutions et les nouveaux défis qu'elles posent aux questions de genre et de liberté académique dans les universités.

**Mots clés:** Afrique, transformations universitaires, genre, liberté

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor and Researcher in Higher Education and the Social Sector. Department of Education Foundations Kenyatta University.

**Abstract** - Issues of gender equity in African universities, as they relate to the academic freedom of women and feminists, as students and teachers are recent. The foundations of gender inequities and the limited academic freedom for women were anchored in the very colonial foundation of the institutions which identified men and masculinity with the labour of the mind and of women and femininity with that of the body and its associated emotions. Efforts by the women movement and feminist academics to make visible issues of gender and academic freedom in the universities have had to confront then decapitating culture of neo-liberalism in the last two decades. While the language of reform and transformation adopted by most universities in Africa signalled a promise to address gender inequities in physical and epistemic access and improving the quality of infrastructure, the subsequent application of neo-liberal principles of privatization and the market eroded this promise. Women are increasing entering the institutions but at a higher cost, while disciplines focusing on teaching women and gender issues have been defined as not 'marketable' enough to generate profits for the institutions. This article examines how these issues are being played out in the institutions and the new challenges they present to issues of gender and academic freedom in the universities.

**Keywords:** Africa, University transformations, Gender, Academic freedom.

## **I) Contradictions in University Transformation and Gender Mainstreaming Discourses**

**S**tarting from the 1990s, most universities in Africa initiated various programmes of transformation in response to global developments. The transformation was meant to address the shortcomings that had faced the higher education sector over the years: university education had remained inadequate and elitist in terms of access; central governments' funding had declined over the years, especially during the economic crisis of the 1980s, resulting in overcrowding, infrastructure deficiencies, and inadequate access to international knowledge resources. These deficiencies have led to problems of access, equity, quality, and relevance, and to an ageing faculty (Sawyer 2004). The quest for transformation, however, needed to go beyond the technical and financial deficiencies and deconstruct the very masculine and elitist foundations upon which university education in Africa had been founded.

As Barnes (2007) succinctly argues, colonialism transmitted traditional European distinctions between labour of the mind and labour of the body directly to Africa. The identification of men and masculinity with the labour of the mind and of women and femininity with that of the body was also transmitted to Africa, along with the senates, the vice-chancellors, the graduation robes, the funny flat hats and the rituals of examination (Barnes 2007: 8). There is a substantive literature showing how gender inequalities in access, participation and epistemic representation of women emanated from the colonial model of education adopted by Africans. Like most contemporary African states whose gendered foundations originated in European imperial projects of the nineteenth century (Sahle 2006), so was the education project, and higher education in particular, designed as a front for the imperial modernity project. Colonial economy and education reinforced the afore-mentioned social structure in a manner that accentuated gender distinctions and identities. Colonial anthropology's images of African society, and especially women, were used as a basis of designing the nature of education and patterns of schooling for them. These images did not affect the provision of education for men as they were incorporated as labourers in the colonial economy. Colonial capitalism was a universal project and skill requirements, not anthropological images, dictated the nature of education for men. Writing in the 1950s, Margaret Mead, a colonial

anthropologist, captured the distinctions that colonial society placed on men and women. She remarked, 'I found in one society both men and women act as we expect women to act, in a mild parental responsive way. In the second, both act as we expect men to act, in a fierce initiating fashion and in the third, men act according to our stereotypes for women, are catty, wear curls and go shopping while women are energetic, managerial and unadorned partners' (Mead 1951, quoted in Komarovsky 1991: 5).

What is troubling is that the reform process that began to be articulated by most African universities in the mid-1990s was not borne of internal reflection. Rather it was a project conceived and proposed by the World Bank, first articulated in its document, 'Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Adjustment, Revitalization and Expansion' (World Bank 1988). The policy called for retrenchment in the area of university education, arguing that in the light of budgetary constraints, the first order of business was to institute reforms toward three simultaneous ends: transfer some of the burden of financing university education to parents and students, reduce unit costs, and shrink public sector participation in favour of the private sector. This policy was later reaffirmed through another policy document, 'Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience' (World Bank 1994), in which the Bank reaffirmed its 1988 policy recommendations with greater emphasis on the neoliberal agenda. The main goal of the document was the marginalization of university education relative to other educational sectors. It is these two policy documents that laid the foundations for claims to 'reforms' or 'transformations' in African universities. The language of reform within the neoliberal project was however double-edged. At one end, it promised and promoted the idea of agency, of choice freely exercised, free of the state and any patriarchal restraints (Sahle 2006; Gupta 2012; Ochwa-Echel 2013); on the other hand, it undermined collective struggles or institutions which made the exercise of free choice and self-sufficiency possible (Gupta 2012). On the whole, the neoliberal project was presented to African universities as a blueprint for their transformation, defining citizens (including the previously marginalized) as economic maximizers governed by self-interest, and glorified the consumer culture among citizens as willing and capable of making market-led choices (Harris 2007). In the area of education, the emphasis then became on its provision as a service to be consumed by those who would afford to buy it (Giroux 2002), or that individuals would

exercise their free choice to buy from the market the kind of education that the resources at their disposal would afford.

The language of reform, therefore, that most universities in Africa adopted, including addressing gender inequities in physical and epistemic access and improving the quality of infrastructure, was not going to be feasible within the neoliberal premises in which the reforms were designed. For the transformation to be complete and real it needed the total deconstruction of the latent cultures of the institutions that privileged men over women in terms of access, funding patterns, epistemic representation in the curriculum of the institutions and their governance. But these were the very edifices that neoliberal reforms aimed to fortify for the sake of capital and greater individualism. Considering the discourse of university transformation in Africa in the last two decades, it is apparent that such transformations have been articulated within a global climate of neoliberalism to the exclusion of more tangible efforts to rid the institutions of the gendered cultures that have as much defined their dysfunctional nature as the economic crisis.

Three trends that have marked the deepening of neoliberal cultures in African universities explain their failure to engender a new culture of critical gender consciousness in the universities; a concern that has been raised by most articles in this issue. First, the economic crisis that necessitated the neoliberal policies and management framework in higher education institutions has shifted the financial burden for university education from governments to students and their families. Consequently, universities have designed more aggressive plans to create alternative income streams, while imposing severe cuts on their provision by cutting academic programmes that are not competitive (Tsiligiris 2012) under the guise of transformation. It is however inconceivable that the language of transformation would be used to describe a situation where formerly excluded populations, most of whom survive on the economic peripheries, are asked to pay more for services that the state was previously providing, and upon which an educated and politico-economic elite that is now mediating such policies was nurtured. But this is the situation women in most African universities have found themselves in, both as students and workers. It is inconceivable that in countries like Kenya, that have a largely privatized public higher education system, a majority of women are only able to access the elite professions through the module two

stream where they have to pay tuition fees at market rates, while they still remain minorities in the regular government subsidized streams. And even in the regular subsidized streams, a majority of the women are concentrated in arts and humanities programmes, not the elite professions.

Transformation has been widely discussed as a process of resetting African universities to focus on their mission. In quantitative terms, increasing student numbers in the name of opening access to previously excluded groups has been part of the transformation. However, accompanying access has been the application of the neoliberal market logic: such that it has been difficult to discuss expanding access to underprivileged majorities, and seeing such students as an income stream to replace dwindling government resources. So the increasing numbers of women accessing the institutions are doing so at a greater cost in a manner that compromises the constitution of a female academic enterprise (Oanda 2005, 2006).

The second trend has been marked by a false but concerted focus on institutions, systems, and practices that lack distinct values and goals, or a mission and vision connecting them to the major challenges of their local and global contexts (Aina 2010). Not much in the name of these transformations has entailed practical and epistemological ruptures with previous ways of doing things and a reconstruction of structures, relations, cultures, and institutions, especially in crafting new ways of addressing issues of gender equity and changes in the organization and process of knowledge production (Aina 2010: 21). This however has not been an oversight or a shortcoming of the reform attempts but part of what is their latent objective. Transforming universities in Africa was a reaction or response to explore ways of generating resources outside of central government funding. The first approach was to try and create public universities and promote them as the best places for university education and all that this entailed including such ideals as academic freedom, and better student welfare policies (Mwiria and Ngome 1998; Mwiria et al. 2007). Once this failed, most of the public universities were privatized.

The third trend, perhaps more fundamental to the undermining of the gender project as part of the transformation programmes of African universities, is what Gupta (2012) has articulated as the

apolitical nature of neoliberal policies and politics. In an attempt to renew and survive, capitalism co-opted feminism to its own ends, by promising values that ultimately created space for a bright but fake feminism. It was easy for both neoliberalism and feminism to agree that limiting state patronage of public services fit well with the feminist critique of the state as both paternalistic and patriarchal. One can easily recall how this is true, with the introduction of gender and women's study centres in a number of African universities from the mid-1990s, and the establishment of gender mainstreaming directorates and affirmative action programmes to increase access that still operate but are slowly losing the hype that accompanied their introduction (Boswell 2003). Ironically, and if it is a confirmation of fears expressed by Gupta (2012), most of the centres and programmes owe their existence to neoliberal donor funding and policy contexts, including the mediation of such contexts by the growth of the NGO sector in Africa. However, the intellectual content of these programmes is diverse reflecting the leaning of academics towards various epistemologies. This is manifested, as Pereira (2002) argues, in the skewedness of the programmes towards descriptive concerns without entailing any transformative potential. Such anchoring of the programmes was soon going to face resistance, including charges that the research agenda on gender tends to be determined by external priorities and policy orientations that reinforce the re-colonization of African social science; and undermine their legitimacy as alternatives to fundamentally restructure processes of knowledge production in African universities (Awumbila 2007). These fears and contestations are demonstrated in the different articles in this volume.

## **II) Gender Trends and Academic Freedom: Emerging Concerns**

If academic freedom entails the freedom to teach and do research without constraint, then one would argue that the transformations taking place in African universities that have entailed a quest to widen physical and epistemic access for women in the institutions were wrought with serious limitations to such freedom. As has been argued, most of the programmes were supported by funding that has tended to skew their operations. This has tended to attract resistance from some quarters, besides the fact that funding sources in themselves act as constraints on freedom of thought and practice. Some of these challenges reflect the forces that continue to prejudice feminist

scholarship at the institutional level, such as persistent patriarchal attitudes. Others are more specific to the conditions of feminist scholarship and treatment of women's issues in Africa. To the extent that formal teaching of women's and gender issues represents a higher pedestal of articulating the issues involved, the aims of such teaching, the contexts in which the teaching takes place and the contemporary reactions that the teaching evokes become issues that have implications for the exercise of academic freedom. Four examples illustrate how these issues have played out in most African universities and the implications that they have for the exercise of academic freedom.

### **1) *The Need to Establish an Epistemological Identity for Gender and Women's Programmes***

One of the issues that continue to dog the development of women's and gender studies in African universities relates to their epistemological orientations. Occasionally, strong feelings, as demonstrated by some of the articles in this volume, are expressed that teaching women's and gender studies in Africa universities based on the tenets of western feminism is an affront to African gender traditions and the quest for intellectual decolonization. The other issue relates to the nature of teaching in the social sciences and humanities where teaching of women's and gender issues in most African universities are integrated. The politics of the social sciences and humanities in African universities have been polemical, and their institutionalization was closely linked to an extroverted view of development in Africa, which has largely failed though some basic assumptions are maintained in the teaching of these disciplines (Geiger 1990). It then seems that the coupling of women's and gender studies within the tenets of global feminism and the social sciences carries with it seeds of subversion, to the extent that teaching based on these tenets is theoretically and practically limiting and distorting. African universities that have introduced courses in women's studies should therefore be explored to examine the extent to which they are addressing this epistemological concern. The necessity for an African feminist epistemology, in the same way as for its content, direction and orientation, has been emphasized by African feminist scholars (Mama 1996, 2003; Oyewumi, 1997, 2003; Pereira 2002). The scholars envisage a context where the development of theoretical insights of feminist theory is emphasized, and African feminist

epistemologies are developed on 'their own terms'. Due to the neoliberal influence though, there is still a dearth of courses focusing on African feminist perspectives, gender analysis or general methodological issues in women's and gender studies in most universities. Most universities seem to be singularly oriented towards the 'gender and development' approach that does not encompass the analysis of issues from an African perspective as envisaged. This approach has been dismissed by African feminist scholars as too reductionist, technocratic and limited in its conceptualization of African societies and gender relations (African Gender Institute 2002). It is a bureaucratized form of feminism and does not address the liberatory concerns of women in Africa (Mama 1996). Another issue that often confronts gender and women's programmes in the universities relates to nomenclature. Women's Studies and Gender Studies are often used interchangeably. The implication here is that the programmes address both women's and gender issues. However, this may not be the case. The detailed descriptions of some courses show a tendency towards more gender analysis as opposed to women's issues. In some cases, courses framed as gender end up as a description of the inequitable situation that women face, comparing it with the situation of males as the title implies. The description of research agendas in the universities also shows this tendency towards descriptive analysis. The issue of nomenclature is important both to the conceptualization of the discipline and the enhancement of efforts towards epistemological authenticity. Gender studies tend to be descriptive: analysing the relationship of men to women, and neutral, by avoiding acknowledging the basis of women's subordination in patriarchal power relations. Women's studies on the other hand are more political and subversive and focus on ensuring that women's lives, realities and concerns are central to the content of knowledge production (Pereira 2002).

## ***2) Establishing Spaces and Contexts for Disciplinary Development***

In most universities in Africa, and as some articles here attest, women's and gender studies continue to face the challenge of overcoming disciplinary marginality. Unfortunately, the very neoliberal forces that were responsible for the introduction of the programmes have been responsible for their marginalization. The arts and humanities where most gender programmes are anchored have seen plummeting student numbers and universities have had to reduce

staff on some of these programmes or abolish the programmes all together due to financial considerations. In some universities, the trend has been to establish centres to spearhead mainstreaming activities, but the centres are usually never backed up with requisite budgets and personnel to be effective. This is the culture of tokenism, which contributes to marginalize women's issues further rather than mainstreaming them in the academy. There is therefore a real danger that a period of seemingly heightened activity translates into minimal feminist scholarship in African universities. Much more needs to be done to give women's and gender studies a disciplinary identity. This is because a disciplinary identity will determine the epistemological properties of women's and gender studies that have been discussed in the previous section. As Becher and Trowler (2001) note, how universities, faculties and departments are organized does make a difference to disciplinary status or identity. Feminists need such a disciplinary identity if they are to construct a new body of knowledge and theory different from representations that the traditional disciplines have made. Yet a discipline cannot secure this identity if it is continuously viewed as an appendage to other disciplines or if activities in the area are not taken as being part of the institutions' core academic business.

The lack of serious disciplinary identity poses several challenges. For example, the fact that so much might seem to go on, when in fact, institutions are not engaged and committed to teaching and reproducing critical feminist knowledge is a likely concern and an affront to women's academic freedom. Universities introduce courses in women's and gender studies not out of a conscious appreciation that this is an important academic area, but out of the desire to appear fashionable and maybe to attract donor money. So much of this kind of response characterizes the universities that have created 'Centres for Women and Development' or 'Gender Studies' without any elaborated schedule for curriculum reform, budgets or personnel. Such centres once created remain active for the period of the donor grant then close down without any impact. This situation is accentuated by a false attitude regarding what constitutes feminist scholarship and who the practitioners are. In some situations, a fundamentalist attitude without much practical commitment to producing feminist knowledge is all that has counted. It is therefore important, as Bennett (2002) observes, that the proliferation of women's and gender studies teaching be evaluated to establish their true contribution to equity

issues and feminist scholarship. An account of what is taught, who is teaching, the institutional environments, and the overall significance of this teaching to the broader issues of women's and gender equity, needs to be established. Besides, there is an emerging tension between the amount of resources needed to establish a new discipline and the expected profits to be realized in tendering with the market-oriented neoliberal reforms that the institutions are implementing. The increasing focus of the disciplines in terms of their commercial value to the institutions is what has contributed to the integration approach, where a topic is introduced without reforming the underlying assumptions. Where donor funding has not been forthcoming, university administrators are reluctant to set specific budgets to popularize feminist scholarship in the institutions. This means that the drive for women's and gender studies is still not internally generated or acknowledged as an academic problematic for African institutions. This commercial attitude will continue to marginalize the few feminist scholars in the institutions and scholarship in the area in general. The onset of marketization policies therefore poses more challenges to the disciplinary identity of women's and gender studies in most African universities. There is hesitation to establish such studies in separate departments as this involves resources that the universities do not have. Funds for hiring and training more faculty in the area are not forthcoming. The increasingly dependence on donors for such programmes may not be sustainable and limits the extent to which funds are earmarked for basic research to produce the much needed African feminist perspectives in the discipline.

### ***3) Methodological and Practical Orientations Towards Teaching and Research***

What should the research and teaching approaches in women's and gender studies be? This question can be answered by reflecting on the necessity of making women's and gender studies an academic area, and the objectives that teaching seeks to achieve. The idea of course is to use methodologies and approaches that create consciousness about the subtle and not very subtle dynamics of gender inequities, to uncover the pervasiveness of gender as a basis for women's marginalization, and to engage in reflective teaching that uncovers how such dynamics have been manifested in different societies and different historical circumstances. However, teaching should not stop here. Good teaching in women's and gender studies should create the

capacity for a transformative gender discourse. There are various issues related to teaching in most African institutions that raise questions as to their capacity to generate a transformative gender discourse. Even in the other disciplines, the lack of resources makes teaching a non-engaging activity. This has been cited as a reason why the institutions do not produce intellectuals with the capacity to transform their societies. Women's and gender studies face this hurdle, first because of the structural characteristics of the institutions in which it is being nurtured, but also due to the nature of the social science disciplines into which it is integrated, and from where it bases its research and teaching methodology.

The point has already been made that cash-strapped institutions do not have resources to invest in the training of new staff and teaching methodologies. This situation damages new areas like women's and gender studies more. The social sciences into which most women's and gender studies teaching is integrated present pedagogical problems for the new area. While at one level women's and gender studies is supposed to be a discipline of its own, the nature of the issues cut across disciplines and therefore call for interdisciplinarity. Some of the traditional social sciences courses into which women's and gender studies has been integrated maintain gender perspectives that perpetuate women's marginalization in the institutions. And yet it is from these perspectives that feminist scholars in women's and gender studies are supposed to develop a new body of feminist knowledge and theory. As Gunew (1990: 23–24) posits, from what position of institutions, knowledge and theory not permeated by patriarchy can feminists construct a new body of both knowledge and theory, *if the traditional patriarchal disciplines are the basis for a feminist methodology and pedagogy?* (emphasis mine). Women's studies therefore faces these pedagogical burdens, burdens that on the one hand need pedagogy critical of the traditional disciplines, and on the other hand embrace the same disciplines as a strategy for constructing a new knowledge, theory and pedagogy that is transformative.

These issues may be glossed over in institutions that embrace the teaching of women's and gender studies out of 'coercion' of some sort, and not out of appreciation of their academic worth. The reasons for this have been given as the desire to satisfy the personnel requirements of a burgeoning NGO sector. Its strategy contributes to

the liberation of women by creating consciousness about the issues outside the universities. Its place in feminist scholarship is however limited as it focuses on gender training as opposed to gender analysis and adopts the apolitical gender and development approach as opposed to women's studies. Pereira (2002) has captured this limitation by emphasizing the goal of women's and gender studies as both political and intellectual, aimed at producing knowledge about 'social realities, past or present, that will further the quest for African societies free from all forms of violence and social injustice where gendered relations and institutions are transformed'. The technical methodology inherent in gender training does not have this capacity as it leans towards the descriptive, while the need is for a subversive methodology.

#### **4) *Contestations over Subject and Representation***

What should be the subject of women's and gender studies and how should the discipline represent its subjects of study? This has been a polemical issue and has dominated every facet of women's struggles. The establishment of women's and gender studies in African universities has been accompanied by a rebuttal from the women's movement in Africa towards the totalizing tendencies of global feminism, and a misrepresentation of the realities of third world women. The urge for an African feminist perspectives stems from this rejection of the inadequacies of western feminism to study, to understand and to liberate the African women. To this end, women's and gender studies in Africa should, in the words of Pereira (2002: 6), produce the kind of knowledge that will strengthen the agency of diverse categories of women, particularly those impoverished and disempowered within the status quo; support women's existing efforts to produce knowledge outside the academy; facilitate women's recognition of diverse forms of oppression across social divides; and strengthen women's collective efforts to organize in support of gender equality and social justice. This is a tall order, given the neoliberal environment in which the discipline is developing, marked by scarcity of resources and a reactionary neo-conservative attitude from established masculine cultures within the institutions.

It is however important to contextualize the dynamics that have marked these debates. Two positions exist. One is the view that African feminist scholarship has marginalized a large constituency of

women mostly in the rural areas, and what is presented as women's studies are the experiences of elite women who have embraced the study of gender in a class-blind manner. In this respect, African feminist scholars are accused of subjecting other African women to the kind of treatment they themselves abhor from western feminism. The second view is that this is actually not the case and the kind of marginalization talked about is a neo-conservative scheme to degrade the feminist agenda in the academy. These debates are still inconclusive, cannot be generalized and are based on the history of the women's movement's previous engagement with the political establishment. There is emerging though, some small-scale evidence that the new feminist movement, constellating around NGOs, is not immune to the masculine designs of political cooptation and patronage. The issues of representation – of whose epistemology and in whose interest – pose daunting ideological challenges to the politics of women's liberation in most of Africa. The ideological tensions emerge in women's studies departments within universities and revolve around feminist scholarship oriented towards global feminist trends and that which is vouching for conservative African perspectives. Others tensions revolve around the feminism of the NGOs and that of mainstream academic discourse with regard to their opposing interrogation of women's and gender issues. There is also tension between feminist scholars leaning towards trendy postcolonial feminist cultural theories and those concerned with the material conditions of women. Outside the universities, such tensions are played out in the arena of civil society and in boardrooms. The concern is whether what is done in the name of women both in the universities and outside represent the concerns and needs of all women or whether it represents an elitist feminist agenda that is like any other form of domination that women have had to endure. How will the teaching of women's issues address these tensions? Is the introduction of women's and gender studies being accompanied by a rewriting of an inclusive literature about women?

These concerns point to three positions that present themselves as challenges and opportunities to the evolution of women's and gender programmes in most universities in Africa. The first has to do with the definition of the 'African woman'. To some academics, an African woman is romanticized as one who starts from the *shamba* and the homestead and proceeds to the boardroom, instead of the reverse

approach. It then follows that writing and teaching about African women and developing African perspectives on gender should start from the experiences that are shared by most women, and these happen to be non-elite. The second position is the elite based feminist scholarship espoused in the NGOs and in most teaching and research approaches (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2002). The third position is that women in Africa, both in the academy and civil society, in politics and in the rural areas are an enemy unto themselves (Oriang 2006). This is in the respect that they constitute a significant majority yet remain apolitical. Given their numbers, if they politicized their agenda, women should not be begging for more girls to be given access to school, for a one-third representation of women in certain positions, or for the acceptance of women's and gender studies as a discipline that like any other needs a budget line in the universities. It is evident from the discussions in the various articles in this volume that the capacity of women to organize, especially in the universities, faces many challenges. Their numbers are few and growth has been slow, masculine cultures are entrenched in both administration and teaching, and every step they take forward is subverted by ongoing neo-conservative attitudes. The manner in which the challenges are being addressed should lead to the evolution of an encompassing, politicized discipline, enriched with the histories of African women, and founded on a transformative pedagogy.

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It is clear from various discussions in this volume that issues of gender and academic freedom in African universities continue to face both challenges and contradictions. While the language of transformation has been employed over the last three decades, partially signalling promises to widen physical and epistemic access to women, the grounds of the transformations on neoliberal cultures of the market and free choice have introduced new hurdles to the realization of such promises. Even when actualized, women as students and workers are increasingly subject to new margins, in the institutions, in a manner that limits their academic freedom. There are several developments against which a nascent academic programme on gender, developing in a region whose universities are struggling with pecuniary issues, need to guard. Two important considerations should inform academic and disciplinary developments in this area. First is the extent to which theories and methods that will mark it as a

discipline energize the authenticity of the other disciplines that study Africa. These are the social sciences and the other African studies disciplines. Second is how teaching and research in the area constitutes a creative response to particular mindsets that have been held about the agency of African women, in the academy and wider society. This will help mark out the area as new intellectual territory contributing to the production of knowledge, address biases that have dominated the study of Africa, and expand the space for academic freedom for those engaged in feminist scholarship in the institutions.

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