



Beyond the Frontiers: Feminist Activism in the 'Global' Academy

Elsa Leo-Rhynie Symposium and 15th Anniversary celebration,
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Introduction

The Caribbean and Africa today share the challenges of being post-colonial contexts in the era of globalization. In some ways this merely reflects the long and durable historical relationship between the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora – as manifest in creative, activist and scholarly communities. Many leading postcolonial theorists from the Caribbean region visited and contributed significantly to Africa's liberation – Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, and George Padmore are among the best known. Even Che Guevara spent time in the Democratic Republic of the Congo before his ill-fated Bolivian journey. I am not sure if Elsa Leo Rhynie had any direct contact with Africa, but her work on gender in higher education has been useful. Other Caribbean feminists have direct involvement with Africa. Dr Peggy Antrobus has visited and contributed to the region many times, and close to hand, Professor Rhoda Reddock is well known to African feminists, and has recently spent a sabbatical at the African Gender Institute working on the pan-African connections of earlier feminists (Reddock 2014).

Many of us have personal connections too, and have had our ideas shaped by pan-African sensibilities and relationships, not to mention collaborative thinking and work. It is now close to 20 years since the early seminars that marked the initiative to establish gender studies in the Caribbean, and that ultimately gave rise to the CGDS. The CGDS has been an outstanding example of feminist activism in scholarly arenas – and has informed and inspired many of us in the feminist movements in Africa.¹ For example, the seminal volume *Gender in Caribbean Development* (Mohammed and Shepherd 1999) is used by the African Gender Institute's teaching programme as is the more recent volume, *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities* (Reddock 2004).

I will present some reflections that derive from my experience as a feminist intellectual worker, blessed with opportunities that have allowed me to bring my

political ideals and my work together. Like many of my generation I underwent years of academic training, schooling that was very separate from my personal and political concerns. During those years I studied the psychological sciences, but was simultaneously involved in anti-racist and feminist struggles as a community activist in the early black women's movement in Britain. I returned home to Nigeria to work with like-minded colleagues to establish independent intellectual spaces, including the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria.² In 1999 I moved to South Africa as the first Chair in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town, where I was appointed to direct the African Gender Institute. There we were tasked with developing teaching and research, and developing continental linkages between the vibrant pan-African scholarly community and post-apartheid South Africa's historically isolated, racially-fraught scholarly community.

Africa's feminist thinkers work in multiple locations to integrate theories and practices, and link research with activism. Those of us equipped with the social consciousness developed by our involvement in women's movements treat the classroom as a key site – for changing consciousness and equipping students to effect change in the wider world. Indeed, the presence of over five million youths enrolled in Africa's universities at any one time provides a major motivation for working within them. More broadly, it is clear to many of us that independent African scholarship offers a unique and valuable vantage point on global processes; one that continues to have relevance to the Caribbean. Independent South-South connections and solidarities are as essential today as ever before.

Feminism is not easily defined in the Caribbean or in Africa where we face all the challenges of our post-colonial conditions. It is not only extremely diverse, but has also been complicated by our disparate histories of gendered colonialism, overlain with the varieties of nationalism that eventually yielded our independent nations. To this we must add the differentiated impact that the global development industry's policies have on our lives. Our bureaucracies,

armies, our media and our education institutions may be similarly organised, but their institutional cultures vary widely, as does the manner in which they are gendered. Feminism is diverse because it arises in response to the myriad manifestations of patriarchy and gender oppression. So it is that African and Caribbean feminisms have many trajectories and forms, as well as being situated within the broad tropes of globalization. Locally, feminist ideas infuse and influence all our major public institutions, from preschools to parliaments, in political, cultural, social, and economic institutions. The realities of globalization make it incumbent on us to make transnational connections and critiques that contribute to demystifying its more disabling economic, social and cultural features and challenging the extractive and exploitative orientation of the global order to the region.

Gender in African Universities

Universities in Africa have a long history.³ In the postcolonial period, they are not so much the global institutions they purport to be as deeply national ones, key sites for the production of national consciousness, many of them established after political independence, alongside the new anthem and flag. African scholars – now numbering hundreds of thousands - are located all over the world. But we have faced many challenges in developing a continental intellectual culture. Observers point out that the study of Africa is still heavily dominated by hierarchies of resources, intellectual discourses, and scholarly and research practices originating in the West (Zezeza 2003, 2006, Mkandawire 2005, Sall 2002). Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) reflects this broader scenario of global inequality, creating an imperative for strengthening local feminist scholarship, something that has been pursued in ways discussed below.

Historically, women's entry into modern African universities has been slow. Africa's mainstream academic cultures and institutions have remained deeply

patriarchal, with men far outnumbering women faculty, and the majority of scholars remain conservative in their gender politics and behaviour. Women continue to experience various forms of direct discrimination, ranging from overt harassment and patronizing treatment, to more invidious assumptions about women's intellectual capacity and availability for professional careers. This is true even in the few places where the undergraduate intake of women outnumbers that of men. Recent years have seen cultural and material conditions in even the internationally renowned universities decline, with increases in student poverty, campus violence, deepening religiosity and deteriorating infrastructure (Diaw 2007, Odejide 2007, Tsikata 2007, *Feminist Africa* 8 & 9).

The gender struggles in universities have not only been about entry and access, but also about ideas and knowledge production. This is most explicitly expressed in the immense effort that has yielded the GWS teaching and research programmes in the region. This process, while it has drawn on the experience of the Caribbean women's studies movement, has clearly faced its own contextual challenges. These include the peripheral status of the region in global arenas, the divestment of public education, the sheer expanse of the African continent, its political instabilities, conflicts and difficult infrastructural conditions. To these one must also add the diversity of scholarly traditions, and languages. While the Caribbean region has much better access to electricity, internet facilities and other key resources, some of these conditions will be familiar to Caribbean feminists. The feminist scholars in both the Caribbean and Africa have sought to address the under-representation of women in institutional cultures, structures and policies, as well as in the androcentric intellectual cultures and curricula of our universities (*Feminist Africa* 1: Intellectual Politics).

Feminist Studies in African Universities

During the last three decades, African feminists have begun to imagine and build a community that brings activist and intellectual work together, to advance social transformations both within and beyond the academy, and to push the disciplinary frontiers of social theory, and develop continental feminist intellectual work. The initiative that informs this discussion begins in 2002, when the African Gender Institute (AGI 2002) held the first of a series of continental workshops that set out a broad agenda which included establishing a feminist scholarly network, developing feminist research and curricula across campuses, and seeking to foster the connections between academic work and activism.⁴ The activities included the ongoing efforts to generate, compile and disseminate feminist knowledge, namely resources that will support teaching and research of a kind that responds to the knowledge needs of feminist political agendas, and thus strengthen the women's movement and activism in the region. This is all informed by the conviction that research and teaching need to involve more deeply grounded levels of engagement with African realities and conditions, albeit framed within a transnational framework that is alert to the manifest diversities of location and privilege. The overtly political conceptualization of this initiative reflects the growing concern that feminist scholars in the region are expressing regarding the emergence of a veritable 'gender industry', and the rise of depoliticized and technicist approaches and toolkits. While the growing currency of gender discourse may be welcomed and indeed accredited to the success of feminist activism, the fact that its uptake is selective, and so often falls short of women's movement agendas, makes this seem more like bureaucratisation or appropriation than social transformation. Indeed, insofar as the uptake of gender conserves the *status quo* and does not challenge unequal gender relations – for example in the distribution of access to power, resources and choices - it can actually serve to obscure rather than challenge gender inequality and injustice.

There are now over 30 campuses with some level of teaching and/or research in the 600 or so universities in Africa. The first gender studies course was initiated at Ahmadu Bello University in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Other initiatives took shape at the Universities of Ibadan and Dar es Salaam in the early 1980's, followed by many others in East, West and Southern Africa. The establishment of gender studies has real intellectual, political and epistemological impacts on the social science community in particular, as reflected in the activities of both the Council for Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organisation for Social Science Research in East Africa (OSSREA). The impact that these mostly small and poorly resourced gender studies initiatives have on the gender relations of the academy outweighs their limited size and capacity, in part because of the changing global context, evidenced by the uptake of gender in international governance institutions and development agencies. Within higher education arenas, the very existence of gender studies has been provocative, leading to continuous discussion and contention among both faculty and students, and ultimately raising the awareness of gender among each generation of students. GWS programmes offer hundreds of young African women a supportive route into higher education, as a key route to professional careers. Over the years this has contributed to the substantial growth of gender awareness in African contexts, and the increased presence of Africa's feminists in local political and international arenas.

The work of developing gender-transformative (feminist) teaching and knowledge-building has been energetically pursued under the auspices of the African Gender Institute from 1996 onwards. The particular project that began in 2002 was dedicated to strengthening feminist studies in Africa. To this end, following the agenda set out at the 2002 workshop, the AGI mobilized funding to lead a series of activities, carried out in collaboration with counterparts in East, West and Southern Africa. These included various field reviews and bibliographic projects, the establishment of the GWS Africa network and list-serve, and a resource website (www.gwsafrica.org) devoted to supporting feminist teaching by providing annotated bibliographies, review essays and

model curricula designed for African contexts. Key areas that emerged from the workshops included sexuality, gender-based violence, feminist legal and policy activism, conflict and peace studies, media studies. Also on the teaching front, a series of curriculum workshops was convened and hosted at the Universities of Ghana⁵ and Cape Town. These set out to develop and design curricula for feminist teaching in various African contexts, largely by rooting teaching in the strategic imperatives defined and pursued by the continent's feminist movements. Finally, we set out to conceptualize and establish an open access, continental gender studies journal *Feminist Africa* (www.feministafrica.org), the first issue of which was published in 2002 under the title 'Intellectual Politics'. The AGI-led continental project has given rise to various local initiatives and a range of research activities, notably those in Uganda at the University of Makerere, where Professor Sylvia Tamale has established a path-breaking project on Gender, Sexuality and the Law, and at the University of Ghana, where Dr Dzodzi Tsikata now directs the recently established Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy. These included the projects that set out to document African politics⁶ (*Feminist Africa* 4 National Politricks), sexual cultures from local feminist perspectives (*Feminist Africa* 5 Mapping African Sexualities⁷), and to critically engage with the gendered dynamics of the institutional cultures of African universities (*Feminist Africa* 8 and 9 Re-Thinking African Universities)⁸, as well as a number of projects addressing sexuality, gender-based violence and sexual harassment in universities.⁹

These initiatives have been seminal, succeeding in the face of a crisis of higher education as a result of externally-imposed economic reforms which divested universities. Suffice to say that these conditions have hampered local research and publication, compromising academic freedom in a manner that continues to present challenges. It is in this context that setting up independent teams of locally-based feminist researchers to carry out projects defined in consultation with local women's movements became a good example of a subversive political-intellectual strategy of working against the grain of hegemonic globalization processes.

Several questions arise out of the experience discussed above. Has the growth of GWS in Africa contributed to social and policy changes? Has GWS advanced/contributed positively to Africa's feminist movements? How do we sustain productive connections between feminist scholarship and feminist activism? And how does the Caribbean situation compare with the African situation, and what lessons and insights can we exchange? Can we move to establish stronger transnational collaborations and exchanges in the coming years?

Impact of Feminism Thinking

The interaction between feminism and public policy has been highly productive, but this poses its own challenges, which I will briefly highlight (see also Cornwall et al. 2004).

Today many scholars and scholarly institutions profess to be 'doing gender' or to have 'mainstreamed gender' by virtue of their involvement in the delivery of donor-supported gender projects, many of them housed in the dedicated structures – gender desks and offices - within state and civil society organizations that had previously had no such things in place. There are also many NGO's that do women's projects, and while these might all owe something to feminism, not all of these are feminist by any means – in the sense that they do not all work to change gender relations. This is not a judgmental observation – but the reality is that there are huge welfare service needs as a result of neoliberal globalization. For example, the retraction of public health, welfare and support systems, and the extremes of urban and rural poverty and deprivation, have exacerbated economic and livelihood inequalities. Rampant mineral excavation and militarization have proceeded to undermine the fabric of ordinary women's lives in ways too numerous and contradictory to detail.

However, it is clear that the 'rolling back' of the state has placed additional burdens on non-governmental women's organizations, and created a contradictory scenario. On the one hand neoliberalism has constrained public services and provisions, while on the other women's activism has kept gender in the picture. The outcome has been a ramification of gender discourses, and some hard-won legal and policy gains, evident in policy documents, but this is very hard to translate into practice when public spending is constrained. Even national budgets are moved out of public purview, to be signed behind closed doors, deals done between Ministers of Finance, World Bank executives, representatives of large corporations and global dealers in military supplies and services.

Concluding Comments

Today activist scholars based in African universities and research centres are making more concerted efforts to bring activism and scholarship together, often across disciplines, across borders and across other divisions, and opening up new fields and new paradigms for activist research. African feminist scholars are defining the field for themselves, linking feminist scholarship with the ongoing realities and struggles of African women, and resisting African men's dismissal of feminism as a Western imperialist intrusion.

The increasing presence of feminist scholarship in Africa reflects the emergence of a new generation of thinkers who are at once educators, researchers and activists. While the university is still reticent on its connections with independent movements, the engagement with public policy has a long history. Feminist scholars are at the cutting edge of efforts to re-think the role of scholarship and to promote synergies between social movements and activism.

What are the implications of all this for transnational feminist theory and activism, and the connections between them? The examples and experiences discussed here demonstrate exciting possibilities. The ongoing uptake of feminist pedagogic and research methodologies as part of activist strategy, the growing use of creative and trans-disciplinary approaches to knowledge-building, and the development of more complex and nuanced theorizations of the dynamics of gender in African political life, are all illustrative of the productiveness of building more consciously designed and strategic synergies between intellectual and activist work.

The value of establishing transnational intellectual activist networks between former colonized societies that today face the multiple manifestations of global forces cannot be overstated. For feminists, these connections offer us invaluable ways of theorizing and strategizing to transform oppressive legacies of the past and resist the negative effects of the increasingly global forces that would otherwise continue to keep our economies, our societies and our creativity at the margins.

¹ I had the privilege of participating in some of the initial workshops, when I worked on the Women and Development Programme at the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands (1989-1991), and this later influenced the vision of a Pan-African feminist intellectual community that we developed on the continent under the auspices of the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute (AGI). Mamphela Ramphele, who became South Africa's first black woman Vice Chancellor, and supported the establishment of the AGI, was also positively impressed by the Caribbean example (personal communication, 1991)

² This was founded at a national workshop sponsored by the British Council and held in Kaduna in 1996, and later registered as the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria.

³ The oldest university on record in Africa, the Islamic University of Karrawyn, was established in the City of Fez back in 859 A.D., by Fatima El Fihria, a woman philanthropist.

⁴ The major support for the project we named 'Strengthening Gender Studies for Africa's Transformation' was provided by the Ford Foundation, duly acknowledged here.

⁵ Due acknowledgement to our colleagues at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

⁶ A collaboration with CODESRIA, supported through their multinational working groups programme.

⁷ A 4-country project supported by a Ford Foundation grant, carried out by AGI in collaboration with Prof T. Manuh at the University of Ghana and Dr C. Pereira of the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria.

⁸ A 5-country collaboration supported by the Association of African Universities, led by Prof T Barnes and A. Mama.

⁹ A Southern African project convened by Prof J. Bennett and supported by a grant from IDRC - Canada

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