

## Editorial

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The launch of *Feminist Africa* marks a critical moment in the continental history of gender politics. Three decades after the development industry first began to respond to the international resurgence of women's movements, African gender politics have become increasingly complex and contradictory. Feminism, as a movement that is both global and local, leaves little untouched. In post-colonial contexts it presents a praxis that directly opposes the hegemonic interests of multinational corporations, international financial and development agencies and nation-states, as well as the persisting male domination of disparate traditional structures, civil society formations and social movements.

In African contexts, feminism has emerged out of women's deep engagement with and commitment to national liberation, so it is hardly surprising that African women's movements today feature in the disparate struggles and social movements characterising post-colonial life. African women are mobilising at local, regional and international levels, and deploying various strategies and forms. Little wonder that they display gender politics ranging from the radically subversive to the unashamedly conservative. Gender politics in post-colonial Africa are deeply contested, within and beyond the minority who might name themselves as feminists. Today's women activists are as likely to be engaging the World Bank over the deleterious impact of structural adjustment on African women as they are to be lobbying the national governments over the marginalisation of women in the corridors of political power, or challenging traditional and community-based organisations.

Since independence, the persistence of patriarchal hegemony across the African region has stimulated a visible proliferation of feminist scholarship and strategy, yet this is only rarely brought together for collective reflection and analysis. The year 2002 has been an exciting one for the continent in this respect. Shared reflection began in January, when the African Gender Institute brought together over 30 women scholars working in gender and women's studies from countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Botswana to launch a new continental initiative, Strengthening Gender and Women's Studies for Africa's Transformation. [1] A few months later, the CODESRIA symposium entitled "African Gender Research in the New Millennium: Perspectives, Directions and Challenges" was held in Cairo. Effectively, this was a long-awaited follow-up on CODESRIA's 1991 gender conference, which yielded the book edited by Imam, Mama and Sow, *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997).<sup>2</sup> A third major event was the Women's Worlds Congress, which was held on African soil for the first time under the apt title, "Gains and Challenges". Hosted by the Women's and Gender Studies Department at Makerere University in July, this gathering was attended by over 2 500 women and men from 94 countries, all of them in some way involved in gender and women's studies, with a sizeable proportion of them drawn from different parts of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

*Feminist Africa* responds to the heightened salience of gender in African political and intellectual landscapes. It provides a forum for the intellectual activism that has always been as intrinsic to feminism in Africa as to feminisms anywhere else. It provides the first continental platform for reflecting on the accumulated wisdom which has matured in the cauldron of postcolonial gender contradictions. It is in this spirit that we see feminist knowledges as comprising the intellectual and political responses - historically rooted in the women's movement - to the challenging realities and conditions of the African continent. In focusing on contemporary postcolonial feminist theories, politics and strategies, *Feminist Africa* makes no apology for valorising feminist academic work and insisting on rigorous analysis. The triumphalist rhetoric of globalisation, the re-marginalisation of women in the new African Union, not to mention the ongoing salience of poverty and outbreaks of conflict, civil and militarism, are all deeply gendered phenomena that demand incisive analysis and

response.

The decision to embark on the strategy of producing an overtly feminist scholarly journal grounded in African contexts is born of the African Gender Institute's ongoing engagement with gender politics, and its strategic objective of contributing to the production and strengthening of intellectual, analytic and strategic skills for advancing the quintessentially feminist agenda of African women's liberation. It is therefore part of our ongoing suite of activities, all of which address the challenge of producing people seriously equipped to contribute to democratic transformation in a region where feminism clearly has a pivotal role to play.

*Feminist Africa* begins with a focus on "Intellectual Politics", so that we can begin by bringing critical feminist perspectives to bear on the institutional terrain that is formally responsible for African knowledge production, namely our institutions of higher learning. Higher education and research organisations in Africa have proved so resistant to feminist intellectual work that many educated women prefer to work elsewhere. Nonetheless, the AGI's recent survey identified over 30 institutions with gender studies in one form or another. Of the 27 centres which provided details, 16 have dedicated gender units, departments or programmes. The remaining 11 do not have a formal dedicated programme or structure, but they do offer courses, modules or substantive input to existing courses. As many as 11 out of the 16 dedicated units state that they offer postgraduate degrees, while 3 offer postgraduate diplomas, and fourteen offer undergraduate courses in gender or women's studies.<sup>4</sup> Gender studies has, in short, gained a substantial foothold in African institutions of higher education and learning, and the African university in particular.

The proliferation of gender and women's studies is all the more remarkable given the deterioration of the African higher education sector from the 1970s to the present day. (We could speculate here that radical philosophies were bound to thrive in postcolonial academies, given the many frustrations of their continued underdevelopment.) International and national policy makers have overseen a dramatic decline in real investment in higher education, despite the increase in the number of institutions from 52 in 1960 to approximately 300 in 2002, and the dramatic rise in the number of students enrolled. In spite of this expansion, demand continues to outstrip supply, a situation that has facilitated the emergence of as many as 70 private and distance-learning institutions, where even the limited quality controls in the public HE sector are absent. With the global push towards marketisation and cost-recovery, it would seem that the commodification of education is likely to proceed unevaluated and unchecked.

The fact remains that African academies have not been able to fulfil their early promise. Instead of benefiting from the enormous pool of capacity that it has produced, the African university has seen most of its home-grown faculty depart for the more affluent and better-resourced institutions of the developed world. Seeking to address the demands for HE within their own borders, impoverished African campuses have resigned themselves to becoming tourist stops for eager young Western students who can and do pay money in exchange for sweating a little. At present, an estimated 100 000 African academics are located in the North; ironically, the same number of expatriate experts is imported to advise African governments each year at annual costs of 4 billion dollars to foreign exchange reserves (see Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999). What could this vast expense, spent differently, have contributed to retaining or returning desperately-needed African faculty, some of whom might have provided sounder advice than all those expatriate experts?

In political and ideological terms, Africa's higher education institutions still have a crucial role to play in the continents' myriad movements for democratisation and gender justice. Our academies remain loyal to the anachronistic cultures, practices and procedures of the

patriarchal past. Deeply suspicious of the feminist demand for institutional and intellectual transformation, many of the elders who dominate the leadership of our academies still dismiss women's liberation as un-African, as President Museveni made very clear this year in his opening address to the Women's Worlds Congress in Kampala. The best among them evade the deeper issues of institutional and intellectual transformation, feeling that they have addressed the matter by buying into the numbers game, according to which a quota is set to allow limited numbers of "women and other minorities" or "women and other disadvantaged groups" to gain access to academies that continue to be profoundly unfriendly places for the women.

Numbers do, in fact, have a story to tell. Recent reviews of the evidence show that women remain grossly under-represented in most areas of study, with very few surviving as far as graduate study, let alone staying on to take up faculty positions. This situation is comprehensively explored in Joy Kwesiga's *African Women and Higher Education* (2002), which is reviewed in this issue. Persistent gender segregation has meant that women remain concentrated in education, arts, and "soft" social sciences, and are still grossly under-represented in the natural and "hard" sciences. The fact that we continue to use such phallic language symbolises the deep difficulty of effecting even the most superficial kinds of change; women who dare advocate more sensitive language-use become the butt of a great many macho jokes and jibes. Little wonder that women still comprise fewer than 6% of the African professoriate, three decades after they were granted "equal access" at independence in most countries (see Ajayi et al. 1996). The fact that this rises to 8% in a South Africa emerging from the tyranny of apartheid, is hardly cause for celebration when one considers the equally persistent racial profile of the South African academy.

What is the university like for this privileged minority who get in, and the smaller minority who stay on to pursue careers? In the context of intransigent institutional cultures, the slowly increasing number of women who are able to enter the academy often find themselves targeted for the worst forms of misogyny. Young, bright women scholars find themselves being subjected to ridicule, derision, and even overt sexual abuse and violence. As faculty members, women may enjoy some of the dubious benefits of benevolent paternalism, but they soon find themselves carrying inordinate workloads, their formal responsibilities being compounded by all the hidden work that arises from carry-over effects of unchanged domestic gender divisions of labour. Women with the potential to become leading researchers find themselves compensating for their presence in the overwhelmingly masculine environment, accepting numerous institutional housekeeping and administrative roles that preclude time for reading and reflection, not to mention research. Among the less visible burdens is the provision of endless student and peer-counselling that assists young women and men, struggling to come to terms with campus life, with managing the daily toll of gender inequality in its various manifestations. The implications of persisting patriarchy are explored in detail in Takyiwaa Manuh's analysis of the institutional culture of the African academy.

The year 1996 saw the emergence of an important movement dedicated to challenging sexual harassment and abuse in Southern African tertiary institutions. Today the "Network of Southern African Tertiary Institutions Challenging Sexual Harassment" (NETSH) has over 400 members on its books, and supports advocacy, research and institutional transformation work across the SADC region (Bennett, 2002). In her recent review of women in Africa's universities, however, Eva Rathgeber states that African women academics "accept discrimination as normal", that "academic women themselves have done little to change the status quo" and that "most African women ...generally are not engaged in bringing about structural change or social transformation" (Rathgeber 2002:290). The NETSH experience demonstrates otherwise, and indeed, is only one of a plethora of strategies and efforts directed at challenging gender inequality and oppression in the HE sector. Jane Bennett's

contribution to this issue critically reviews the accumulated experience of gender equity strategising in Africa's academies, noting the very real challenges that face those who have struggled hard to overcome misogynistic institutional and intellectual cultures. Women are prominent among all those fighting to ensure that African universities play a transformative role with regard to Africa's many oppressive and anti-democratic legacies.

A key feature of the African intellectual landscape has been the growing importance of alternative institutions and scholarly networks, as these have developed to fulfil aspirations that the university has been unable to address. Women have devoted great energy and insight to these independent structures, despite their small numbers. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), for example, has benefited from women's contributions in a number of ways, most visibly in the slowly increasing presence of women in its publication output, in its hosting of two international conferences on gender studies (Dakar, 1991 and Cairo, 2002), and in the establishment of an annual short course in gender studies. Zenebworke Tadesse served as Director of Publications for over ten years, during which time she encouraged women to participate in all aspects of the network. Since she left, Sheila Bunwaree and Felicia Oyekanmi have held key programme positions. The Harare-based Southern African Regional Institute for Policy Studies (SARIPS) has also benefited from the energetic involvement of a small number of women academics, notably Patricia McFadden, Ruth Meena and more recently, Desiree Lewis.

Contemporary reviews of the intellectual production coming out of African academies and research institutes suggest that despite earlier warnings (see, for example, Imam et al., 1997) gender studies is having limited impact on mainstream scholarship (see Sall, forthcoming). Instead, the male-dominated research and publications arena largely continues to ignore the intellectually transformative implications of feminist theory, which, by definition, cuts across all the major disciplines. In this issue, Charmaine Pereira's contribution clearly demonstrates the importance of using gender as a tool of analysis for reflecting on African intellectual output. Taking us beyond the rapidly expanding field of gender and women's studies, she critically examines the impact of gender studies on mainstream scholarship more than a decade after the first continental workshop dedicated to the engendering of the African social sciences was held by CODESRIA in Dakar.

Over the years leading up to the present spread of gender studies centres, women scholar-activists established a number of alternative organisations, beginning with the establishment of AAWORD in 1977. In 1993 the Forum of African Women Higher Educationalists (FAWE), comprising women ministers of education and vice-chancellors, was established specifically to advocate for improvements in the educational prospects of girls and women, in the hope that more would make it into the university. The AGI was established in 1996 with a continental mandate to develop intellectual capacity for gender equality in African contexts. There have also been a number of sub-regional and national initiatives in gender research and scholarship. The Women's Research and Documentation Centre at the University of Ibadan, which is profiled by Abiola Odejide in this issue, was rapidly joined by several others detailed elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Off-campus research, information and training NGO's have also proliferated, many of them drawing on long experiences of research and activism, and deploying the full weight of new technologies to challenge men's domination of mainstream systems of African knowledge production. The best-known examples of these are Isis-Wicce, based in Kampala, and the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), which have recently been joined by the emergent Feminist Studies Network.<sup>6</sup>

The contributors to this launch issue of *Feminist Africa* have been drawn from across the continent to present critical analyses of the gender politics of African academies. They take

our understanding far beyond the easy option of blaming the victims of institutionalised subordination. What they have to say challenges leaders and policy-makers to support the emergence of a new, transformed and transformative academy in which African women and men can gather to learn from one another, to grow, to prepare themselves to contribute their creative energies, their ideas and their talents to the transformation of the African continent, against all the odds. A luta continua!

## References

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## Footnotes

[1] Workshop report available on <http://www.gwsafrica.org>.

[2] A report on the 2002 CODESRIA symposium is available at <http://www.gwsafrica.org>.

[3] A report by Elaine Salo and Desiree Lewis is available at <http://www.gwsafrica.org>.

[4] Details are available from the online directory available at <http://www.gwsafrica.org>.

[5] See "Activism and the Academy", AGI Newsletter editorial, 1999, at <http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi/newslet/vol4/index4.htm>.

[6] See details at <http://www.gwsafrica.org>.