

GENDER ACTIVISM AND STUDIES IN AFRICA

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CODESRIA Gender Series 3



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Preface

Over the years since its founding in 1973, gender research and training activities have assumed a progressively important role and place in the work of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Within the framework of the Council's strategic plans for the period 2002–2007, a decision was made to carry the existing institutional commitment one step further by launching a *CODESRIA Gender Series* that would also serve the goal of creatively extending the frontiers of the institution's publications programme. The hope was that through the *Series*, not only would the Council take a lead role in showcasing the best in African gender research but also provide a platform for the emergence of new talents to flower. The thematic variety and analytic quality of contemporary debates and research in Africa around gender issues is testimony to the mileage that has been successfully covered since the early days when African feminists struggled hard to make their voices heard. Today, few are the social scientists who are not aware of the basic issues in gender research and the community of those who apply the gender approach is growing. But as several of the participants at the CODESRIA-sponsored April 2002 Cairo international symposium on new directions in African gender research also observed, the challenges that remain in engendering the social sciences and the policy process are numerous, and addressing them requires the mustering of the capacities and convening powers of institutions like CODESRIA. The Council stands ready to play its part in meeting these challenges and the new *Gender Series* is designed as a modest contribution which in full bloom will capture current debates and deepen the African contribution to reflections on the theme of gender, feminism and society.

As indicated earlier, CODESRIA's commitment to the goal of engendering the social sciences and humanities in Africa dates back a long time. Some of the early research which the Council supported was instrumental in the development of new perspectives in African gender research while an investment has also been made in recent years in the provision of opportunities for training younger scholars in gender methodologies. In this connection, the CODESRIA Gender Institute has run every year since its inception in 1998, covering a variety of themes and gaining in respect and recognition among female and male scholars

alike. The path-breaking 1992 international conference which the Council hosted on the theme of engendering the social sciences stimulated a series of initiatives and debates, and also generated some of CODESRIA's best-selling publications. The emergence of an active and networked community of gender researchers in Africa in which CODESRIA has played a frontline role underscores the point that a positive wind of change has blown across the social research community, and there is no turning back the clock of the struggle for gender equality. This notwithstanding, the term 'feminist' still generates fear among some male (and female) researchers, and as Fatou Sow observed in her keynote address at the CODESRIA 10th General Assembly, it is still not completely given that women can fully enjoy their rights without let or hindrance (*'les femmes ont le droit d'avoir les droits'*).

Through its gender-related scientific activities and the launching of its *Gender Series*, CODESRIA acknowledges the need to challenge the masculinities underpinning the structures of repression that target women. It is to be hoped that the *Series* will be kept alive and nourished with insightful research and debates that challenge conventional wisdom, structures and ideologies that are narrowly informed by caricatures of gender realities. While much research has been done in this regard by feminist scholars elsewhere, in Africa, sustained research remains to be initiated in ways that are sensitive to the predicaments of women at different levels of society within and across national and regional boundaries. CODESRIA is committed to encouraging research along these lines. However, the rigour with which such research is conducted is of utmost importance, if gender studies and feminist scholarship are not to fall prey to the same myopia that accounts for the insensitivities of mainstream male-centred perspectives or the irrelevancies of western approaches masquerading as a universalism that takes no cognisance of the African historical context or which is ill-adapted to African concerns.

Most of the papers that have been selected to launch the *CODESRIA Gender Series* were initially presented at the April 2002 Cairo symposium which was organised around five main objectives, namely, to: (a) provide a space/platform for an exchange of ideas as well as a sharing of visions on gender-related themes and issues from pan-African perspectives; (b) prioritise areas of gender research that have a potentiality to transform social relations; (c) encourage gender-based knowledge production which is informed by African realities and give a 'voice' to younger African scholars; (d) identify ways and means of improving advocacy and consolidating linkages between knowledge production and activism for the advancement of women interests; and (e) work towards a cross fertilisation of ideas, methodologies and epistemologies, as well as consider ideas for the creation of comparative research networks on issues affecting women and their livelihoods. The first four publications chosen to launch the *CODESRIA Gender Series* bear testimony to the diversity of interests in the field of gender research, diversities

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which are necessary for a healthy debate that advances knowledge. The Council hopes that readers will be sufficiently stimulated as to consider contributing manuscripts for consideration for publication in the *Series*.

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Executive Secretary

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Head of Publications

