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## Locating Gender Studies in the Pan-African Ideal: A Reflection on Progress and Possibilities in Uganda

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### Introduction

To what extent is the African intellectual agenda taking gender analysis seriously? And conversely, to what degree has gender studies sufficiently enhanced African discourse? When the book *Engendering African Social Sciences* was published, there was enormous optimism that African feminist scholars were beginning to talk beyond their circles, and to re-centre the feminist challenge within mainstream social science in Africa. Equally important, there was hope that key African intellectual spaces like CODESRIA were beginning to take gender seriously, which in turn would legitimate gender analysis in the social sciences. It is now useful to review progress towards that goal. Where are we with respect to these aims? Who are or should be the actors involved in attaining it?

Gender studies comes into the intellectual space as a critique of dominant frameworks of knowledge that presented and reproduced the androcentric or male view of the world. As Imam argues, much of the social sciences has been and is (although still refusing to admit it) a rudimentary form of men's studies' (1997:6):

Here I am referring to the numerous studies, misleadingly titled 'the working class in Africa' or democracy in Africa and the like. More accurately they ought to be titled 'the male working class in Africa' or man and democracy in Africa. The problem is that these studies of men's relations to the state or to agriculture, etc., masquerade as encapsulating the whole society.

This chapter is about assessing gender studies initiatives and the extent to which they have transformed the African Academy. Using the case of Uganda, the paper will attempt to map out the progress and possibilities in terms of how far the field has legitimated the study of gender, especially in the social sciences. But stopping at this position would paint a one-sided picture. There is an additional matter, that will be considered, about the nature of the intellectual space, both in terms of the academic institutions and the people within them—the intellectuals and the extent to which they are receptive to gender as an organising principle in social analysis.

While gender studies has by large become a legitimate discipline, it is recognised that biases in mainstream social science still exist. It may be argued that the different disciplines within the social sciences may vary in terms of substance and degree of the gender gap, but it is noted that the Social Sciences in general are yet to take on gender as a core concern. At a minimum, a number of scholars in Uganda will add a paragraph or two, in order to be accountable to donors in cases where the latter make it a conditionality. This has bred a kind of discourse that is predicated on a few rhymes about women's suffering with little analysis. The logical consequence of this is that the field of gender has been made to sound so simplistic that it is a widely held assumption that anybody can talk and write about gender, with or without any amount of serious reflection.

The chapter addresses two major questions. I begin with the issue of nationalism and the role of culture—how does gender studies engage with what we call 'African culture'? This relates to the whole issue of the need to constantly justify the legitimacy of a gender approach to social reality (Sow 1997), particularly defending it from accusations of western imposition of anti-family values to Africa while supposedly diverting African peoples from 'struggles of fundamental importance' (Sow 1997:41). Secondly there is the challenge of the academic versus the political and the whole question of managing success.

### **The Feminist and the Pan-African Ideal**

My understanding of the Pan-African ideal, in terms of social science, concerns the pursuit of frameworks of knowledge for adequate understanding of Africa's past and present social, political, economic and cultural realities, which understanding forms the basis for social transformation. Without question Pan Africanism is predicated on the history of exploitation, oppression, marginalisation as well as struggle of African peoples. This means that all spaces of inequality and conflict in society such as in class, race, gender, ethnicity religion, region and age, have to be addressed. Of all these social cleavages around which social science in Africa has centred, gender seems to be the most contentious in terms of legitimacy for its study and articulation. This is what, for instance, Jayawardena alludes to in arguing that the concept feminism has been the cause of much

confusion in 3rd world countries, variously alleged by traditionalists, political conservatists and even certain leftists, as a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism. Feminism is purportedly based on a foreign culture of women of the local bourgeoisie; and that it alienates or diverts women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities.

In a very unique way, gender tends to engage people at their own personal self. This is why, for instance, matters of sexuality and sexual rights of African women tend to provoke a fundamental sense of challenge and/or terror even from male academics (Hutchful 1997:193). In majority of cases scientific debate ceases as soon as reflection on the question of women and gender relations in the social sciences is underway (Sow 1997:33). Both men as well as some women academics tend to limit imagination by placing their person right in the midst of the narrative. This is not a debate about neutrality and objectivity in science but rather to highlight the very unique terrain of gender where the personal is placed differently from other disciplines.

People who advance gender equality are often blamed by ardent Pan Africanists of copying western culture and thereby discarding African values as traditionally barbaric and savage. I would like to argue here, that both sides must necessarily plead guilty- of upholding and reproducing decontextualised views about Africa. Those who blame African culture for being eternally anti-women lack the sensitivity of the fact that what we call African now is largely the distortion of African culture and realities due to the colonial invasion. Those who uphold traditional African culture have committed an additional sin. They are not willing to look and go back, for that matter to those aspects of African culture that pointed towards egalitarianism. There is limited imagination (Pereira 2002). They are negating historical reality by holding to the distorted cultural practice as 'the African Culture' to be protected from external influence. I use two cases arising out of electoral politics in Uganda to raise some questions about what we understand to be African Culture.

### Case 1: Election Violence in Domestic Space

During presidential elections in 1996, election violence at household level was reported in the local press. Here I present just a caption of what was reported. In one case, a man was arrested for allegedly killing his wife for celebrating president Museveni's election victory (*The New Vision* May 15, 1996). When the reporter contacted the police, the Deputy Public Relations officer was reported to have said that when they conducted investigations the neighbours said that 'quarrelling was a normal issue between the deceased and her husband'. In the another related incident, Pross Nakyanzi of Masaka District, had one of her eyes damaged and her leg broken after she was beaten by her husband Joseph Bukenya for celebrat-

ing Museveni's victory. By the time of reporting Bukenya had not been arrested. Police was investigating the case (*The New Vision*, May 15, 1996). In another case, a man allegedly arrived from upcountry where he had gone to cast his ballot in favour of Paul Ssemogerere (the vanquished) only to find his wife jubilating over the victory of her presidential candidate, Yoweri Museveni. A neighbour who preferred anonymity said that real trouble started when on asking for food and water to bathe, the husband was allegedly told by the wife that with her candidates win, their roles in the home had changed, with her becoming the man.

### Case 2: Women Kneeling for Voters in Local Government Elections

Decentralisation in Uganda has ensured that people select their leaders through periodic elections. One of the gendered ways in which these contests are played out is that women candidates are required to project themselves in specific ways as special political actors – to conform to the definition of the 'ideal woman'. In the central region for example, women are required to kneel for the voters. In the 2001 local election campaigns I observed that before they addressed rallies women were required to kneel down and greet the voters.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, in Kiganda culture, women and girls are supposed to show respect to men and elders by kneeling down, whether to greet or otherwise. This social practice was extended to the public space in a very powerful way, particularly with the onset of decentralisation. Before a woman candidate addressed a gathering, she had to kneel and greet the voters in a 'respectable' manner. There was one woman candidate who however lost the vote because she allegedly overdid the ritual. According to her contestant, she knelt everywhere, on the roadside and wherever she came across men and potential voters – sometimes kneeling for small boys who were not of voting age yet.

The two cases project women as a specific political constituency whose citizenship is circumscribed by social definitions of womanhood and wifehood. Specifically, in the case of kneeling for voters, women who did this were recalling traditional respect and subservience towards men. Transferring the practice into modern politics was at the same time articulating a new subordination that puts women 'in their place'. Thus the articulation of tradition with modern forms creates a new kind of subordination and secondary status for women. The significance of this articulation has to be characterised and historicised rather than merely being labelled African culture. The issue of election violence in private space says something about the public/private dichotomy, the interconnectedness and how gender relations are thereby intertwined within it, as well as the cultural definitions of wifehood.

Many gender analyses in Africa and elsewhere would immediately and without hesitation understand the above as cases and proof of African culture and tradition and how it denigrates women. Pan-African perspectives would probably have excluded considerations about women kneeling for votes as an issue worthy of academic scrutiny. And possibly election violence would be interpreted in terms of state interference into the family. Hence while uncritical gender analysis would concentrate on the internal, projecting Africanness as essentially repressive and inferior, the Pan-African perspective would on the other extreme end, exalt and homogenise Africanness and externalise the gender dynamics at play. This is normally done by arguing that some women in pre-colonial traditional societies wielded power as in the case of some members of the royal clans and the fact that production systems at the time did not project major gender inequalities and were based on complementarity rather than exploitation and oppression of one gender. The same analyses are advanced in questions of bride price (Muhumuza 2002). What purpose should the history for instance of African pre-colonial societies serve? Should it be to delegitimize concerns about gender relations and equity or rather give them more impetus?

Furthermore, gender studies sometimes tends to be turned into a subject of ridicule and laughter. It is also subjected to scrutiny, suspicion, supervision as well as biased evaluation. At a conference convened by CODESRIA in 1995, to specifically address the question of engendering African Social Sciences, Mkandawire, then Executive Secretary, is quoted to have confessed thus:

When I opened this conference a few days ago, I confidently, or rather foolhardily stated: "I am not convinced that there is a corpus of methodologies, approaches or empirical studies based on gender analysis waiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social sciences community. Much work needs to be done." After listening to the discussions in the last four days and reading some of the papers presented here I am convinced that my remarks were as good a case of the total triumph of ignorance over intellectual humility and open mindedness as there was ever. I would therefore like to rephrase my remarks as follows: "I am now convinced there is corpus of methodologies, approaches and empirical studies based on gender analysis waiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community. I do however maintain much work needs to be done" (Imam 1997:1).

Our interest in the confession by such a distinguished African scholar, is at two levels. One is that gender studies no longer has to face stiff resistance. In many universities on the continent, including Makerere, Gender studies exists either at the level of a department or subject offered within the general social sciences both at undergraduate and post-graduate level, a phenomenon that dates back to

the early 1990s. In contrast to the last three decades or so where social science discourse was blind to the gender variable, there is some degree of legitimacy as a result of these initiatives. The second relates to the closing remark of the confession to the effect that ‘much work needs to be done’.

### **Which work needs to be done? Whose responsibility is it?**

It could be argued that the comment by Mkandawire, to the effect that much work needs to be done in as far as gender studies is concerned, is still based within masculinist notions of knowledge. Any field of knowledge continuously calls for work to be done, and specifically singling out gender studies is not only an attempt to marginalise the field but also a process of ‘othering’ it, albeit in a way that sounds positive. However, we need to acknowledge that as a relatively young discipline, Gender Studies needs to go an extra mile in terms of not only filling the gap in knowledge about relationships between men and women, but also to have a conscious struggle in terms of fundamentally restructuring processes in the production of knowledge. Here the question is: Who has the responsibility to identify and actualize this daunting task?

Many a scholar would have one straight answer to this question, assuming that the above responsibility falls squarely on those popularly referred to as gender scholars. For instance, political scientists will more often than not challenge gender studies to develop an adequate feminist theory of the state, absolving themselves of any analytical responsibility (Parpart & Staudt 1990; Hassim 1998). Is there, for instance, a possibility of challenging political science to develop an adequately gender-inclusive theory of the state—to capture all realities of society, including that of the relationships between men and women? How do we define Pan-Africanism for instance? Is it a concept that has the potential to accommodate the complexity of African realities? Or, is it a homogenising discourse that blurs internal dynamics such as of gender?

It is important to acknowledge the strides that have already been made. The argument now is not whether or not gender studies is necessary as a discipline. What confronts us today is the ‘how’ of gender studies. Are we satisfied with a situation where gender studies is accepted in principle and yet social science proceeds as if nothing has changed, i.e. as if the existence of gender studies does not require any rethinking of mainstream social sciences? As according to Pereira, the situation where gender studies runs parallel to the malestream of scholarship in which gender blindness is accepted as the norm, ‘raises the broader question of how successfully feminist thought has permeated non-feminist ‘progressive’ scholarship in Africa’ (2002:15).

The challenge of gender studies is that it cuts across disciplines and is hence multidisciplinary in nature. But what does this multidisciplinary mean? Is it supposed to only refer to a new breed of scholars that may sometimes translate into jacks of all trades and masters of none? It seems to me that gender studies will,

as of necessity draw strength from both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity—meaning that other disciplines in the social science and humanities have to be part of the process of legitimating gender as a fundamental category of analysis. Relating this to the fundamental goal of Pan-Africanism, it would therefore mean that feminist analyses have to seek to produce knowledge that can speak to critical African realities just as mainstream scholarship should speak to these very realities with the gender category on board.

The demand on social scientists other than specific gender scholars to take on gender studies within the core of their relevant disciplines may raise a basic issue about autonomy versus integration. Kwesiga argues that the integration/autonomy debate is between separation versus ghettoisation. Referring to Women's Studies Kwesiga summarises the debate as follows:

If Women's Studies is fully institutionalised,...it runs the risk of being isolated and therefore becoming marginalised and ineffective and not being taken seriously. On the other hand, integrationist... approach is aimed at counteracting dangers of autonomy for a relatively new and perhaps not wholly accepted discipline. In this case the fear is for Women Studies to become invisible, and easily muzzled up. There is the possibility that only a few courses or concepts will be appended to the mainstream discipline, thus losing track of the initial objective- to transform the whole discourse of knowledge and knowledge production (Kwesiga 1998:4).

There is an additional fear around integration—the danger of depoliticising gender studies. The hesitation with regard to even contemplating the idea of integration is that it can be manipulated to play down what would otherwise be a conflict-laden terrain (Ahikire 1994). There is a fear that gender studies, might be turned into a neutral discourse, where scholars adopt a non-confrontational posture to fit within the academia requirements. This is what Schmidt (1993) refers to as the political price of professional and institutional acceptability. Since gender studies is motivated by a political aim of highlighting and challenging oppression, it cannot afford to cast the net so wide as to trap even those who are not politically motivated.

The integration versus autonomy debate remains largely unresolved and Kwesiga metaphorically illustrates it with the phrase—'to be or not be' (1998:4). We would like to see the entire social science community actively engaged in this debate, because we all have the analytic responsibility to develop a sophisticated analysis of society.

### **The Challenge of Managing Success and the Thin line Between Gender Academics and Activism in the African Context**

The Department of Women and gender studies at Makerere University is often referred to as the academic arm of the women's movement in Uganda. This

raises the question of whether members of the department belong to the world of academia or activism. The matter is not as simple as it looks. The thin line between academic feminism and activism becomes more complex when we consider the lived situation of professed gender scholars. They are often invited to a multiplicity of tasks – research projects, conferences, institutional meetings, workshops and seminars. They are expected (by general consensus) to make a position on any contentious issue in the media, on new government laws and policies or other key fora concerning women. With the onset of the concept of gender mainstreaming whose logic is predicated on the fact that gender is a ‘cross-cutting issue’, professed gender scholars are simply overwhelmed by the demands on their person.

My interpretation of this is to, first of all, count it a success that gender is even on the agenda. It is no longer as invisible as it was two decades ago, for instance. Particularly the few female (feminist) scholars who have managed to cut through minimum formal academic qualifications are on high demand. On average, a female academic has more opportunities for exposure (both nationally and internationally) than a male academic of the same qualification (especially within the generation of young African intellectuals). Given the current situation of gender politics, such women will also be required to assume administrative and decision making positions in the University. Some level of space and acceptability for women and gender has been created and a number of women are seeing themselves in positions of Deans, Directors, Heads of departments and membership to important committees in the university—and we need them there. But there is a vacuum created at another level—of building the discipline and more importantly, the feminist challenge. This is how I bring in the notion of managing success. The high demand on the few qualified women scholars ends up working against the broader objective as they become overstretched and possibly less effective in advancing the field of gender studies in a fundamental way. In analysing the status of the department of Women and gender studies at Makerere University, Kasente notes that:

There is so much to do and there are so few people to do it that more time is spent on getting things done rather than on allowing space for reflection, strategic planning monitoring. It is also very difficult to challenge the status quo (2002:98).

Indeed one does not have to be a woman to advance the field of gender studies, just as one observer argued that: ‘You don’t have to be a peasant to undertake peasant studies’ (Manyire in DWGS 2002). Which means that we could envisage a situation where both women and men scholars engage with the gender dynamic. But Hutchful (1997) reminds us in relation to the gender blind landscape of history as a field that women scholars would have to take the lead in excavat-

ing what Gerda Lerner (1973) referred as the female aspect to all history, 'sometimes working under lonely (and occasionally hostile) environment' (1997:198). Here Hutchful latently underlines the element of struggle for legitimacy that the field of gender studies still faces despite the fact that it is formally accepted in the academy. This means that the cohort of feminist women scholars has to necessarily reach a critical mass in order to engage with the multi-pronged mandate of gender studies in the African Academy. The minimum of this then points to enhancing numbers of women academics which, as indicated by Kwesiga's (2002) gender analysis of higher education access in Africa, are constrained by both institutional and broader cultural factors.

The second aspect about managing success is to do with the apparent direct link between gender scholarship and transformation of gender relations. While for instance an intellectual in Political Science or Sociology can afford to be purely academic, gender scholars are more often expected to demonstrate the link with the situation of women. In gender studies, the role of the intelligentsia is quite often envisioned in quite direct terms vis a vis the change in women's lives. While it is exciting to be engaged with a field that projects direct societal utility in terms of transformation, it is equally disarming when such expectations conflate roles and positions. In Uganda, for instance, the accusation leveled on gender studies is elitism – it has not done anything to liberate the grassroot woman, the rural woman, the poor woman<sup>2</sup>. These are specific questions targeted at gender studies, never or rarely (with similar magnitude) to other disciplines in the Social Sciences.

In a candid self-reflexive stance as a member of the department of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University, Kasente (2002) for instance, observes that much as the department is based at the University, it was principally initiated by the women's movement, as part of the strategy to transform women's lives, many of whom live in rural areas. To Kasente, this initial vision of generating knowledge that would be practically applied to transform gender relations has been muzzled up by the very academic and patriarchal set up of the department.

Yet on the other hand, through the latent urge of fitting into the 'mane' of the academic arm of the women's movement, there is already an emphasis within gender studies in Uganda, on policy influence through (unwittingly) projecting women as the worst sufferers situations such as of poverty, armed conflict and in pandemics such as of HIV/Aids. These approaches which Harding (1987) would otherwise refer to as victimologies hence tend to dominate gender analyses at least in the Ugandan context. The tendency view women as eternal victims could be understood in political terms since gender studies is principally driven by the motive to highlight the plight of women. Typically people only take action once the issues at stake have reached alarming levels. Phrases such as 'women constitute half of the population, perform two thirds of the world's work, receive only

a tenth of the world's income and own less than 1 per cent of the world's property', are evidence of this phenomena. This is also the language that donors, policy-makers tend to understand. This logic has been further spiced up by the instrumentalist argument that unless women are considered, full development would remain a futile exercise (World Bank 1993), implying that it is only efficient to include women in the development process rather than a basic concern about justice and human rights. There is an urgent need to realise that critical analysis also holds the door for effective political practice because simplistic notions and stereotypes tend to deliver equally simplistic notions of political practice hence undermining the very ultimate goal.

These are very critical questions. To what extent can a university department take on the mandate of providing knowledge that can be *practically* applied to address complex social relations? Does this very definition set it up for failure? What is the broader implication for gender studies then? For instance, Uganda as a country fits the full picture of what Ihonvbere (1994) refers to as Africa's predicament- of poverty, war, corruption—name it. The intersection of these realities with gender has for instance brought forth a realisation about the increasing feminisation of poverty in that women tend to be the poorest of the poor in specific contexts. However, Gender studies should not only focus on influencing top-down change in terms of policy for addressing 'women's problems'. It should also build critical resources for bottom up [African] women's agency taking into account the multiple spaces of struggle—what, in the words of Mama (2002) requires 'a high level of analytic and strategic capacity' combining locally acquired experience and knowledge with international acumen (2002:7). This is not an idea about gender scholars directly 'helping' ordinary women, but rather engaging the discipline to cause transformation in wider society. And in my view, that transformation would necessarily involve the broader African intellectual agenda rather than just the professed gender scholars and institutions.

### Concluding Remarks

This is a reflection on a number of issues on the state of gender studies in the African Academy, which may have relevance for situations elsewhere. The main argument made here is that although gender studies is present in the form of a department and subject, it is still on the margins of scholarship on Africa. In other words, strategic presence of the gender perspective is yet to be achieved. Such a realisation has informed initiatives such as the journal *Feminist Africa* by the African Gender Institute (University of Cape Town), which is aimed at aggregating and/or concretising the feminist challenge on the African continent. The journal aims at providing a platform for informative and provocative gender work attuned to African agendas. There is need for such and similar initiatives at local levels, with the aim of recentering intellectual politics in order to take gender seriously. As I have argued, this is a goal that may have women/feminist

scholars as key actors but we need to advance a political project that bestows guilt on the entire intellectual community—what Sow (1997) understands as entrenching the gender perspective within the domain of social thought as a whole.

### Notes

- 1 Even at a national level, one woman parliamentarian was pictured in the press ‘kneeling in advance’ for voters. She was supposedly telling voters that she would be going to ask for their vote during the next parliamentary election (see *New Vision*, October 3, 2000) In a related incident, the wife of a parliamentary candidate went down on her knees and asked voters to vote for her husband ‘throwing the rally into frenzy’. ‘I have known my husband for 14 years, he is a good man and he does not even go out with other people’s wives,’ reported *The Monitor*, June 19, 2001.
- 2 More often these views are predicated on the conflation of poverty and gender oppression, such that middle class women whether in the academia or public politics or civil society are automatically conceived as bearing the more or less philanthropic responsibility of liberating the poor rural women.

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