

African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms

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An Investigative Framework for Gender Research in Africa in the New Millennium

Filomina Chioma Steady

Introduction: Africa – A Continent in Crisis

The majority of African countries are in crisis. Protracted recession, the debt burden, structural adjustment programmes (SAP), externally-controlled privatization and an emphasis on exports are creating a cultural crisis of major proportions on the continent. Meanwhile, economic domination through corporate globalization is the primary global strategy for growth. The resulting development paradigm is re-colonization through the reproduction of hegemonic tendencies that facilitate the movement of trans-national capital. The marginalization of Africa through corporate globalization has led to widespread poverty, the destruction of many African economies, social dislocation and civil strife. This is compounded by the erosion of the life-supporting capacities of many African ecosystems. Authoritarian regimes and gender-based discrimination complete the picture.

Global economic processes are producing new dimensions of structural racism through North/South and Black/White polarizations. At the United Nations conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa, last year, the correlation between corporate globalization and racism; and the gendered dimensions of this correlation were highlighted. Racialised women become recruited into the international labour force as cheap sources of unprotected and migratory labour and as objects of sex tourism, trafficking and domestic servitude. The overwhelming evidence suggests that gender-based hierarchies and gender subordination, combined with structural racism, are being reinforced

by corporate globalization. African women are among the most severely affected (Steady 2002).

The study of gender in Africa cannot escape the realities of post-colonial domination. Through the reproduction of colonial-like policies supported by international financial institutions and international corporate laws, the patriarchal ideologies of colonization are being reproduced through globalization. It is no surprise then that despite significant epistemological challenges of the post-modernist era, Eurocentric concepts, methodologies and paradigms in the study of gender in Africa over the last 30 years continue. They remain the compelling and pervasive force in presenting one-dimensional, frozen and simplified writings about women in Africa.

This paper examines the impact of external concepts, methodologies and paradigms in African gender studies while presenting evidence that their supporting academic structures validate the exploitation of the continent. It also proposes African-centred approaches based on an understanding of African socio-cultural realities, feminist traditions and philosophies. The aim is to develop gender-focused frameworks of analysis that can bring out the multiple and varied social locations of African women while maintaining their specific identities and priorities. Hopefully, this will allow for new approaches in gender research that will promote greater understanding of gender issues, gender equality, social transformation, women's empowerment and strengthened linkages with other women. In this regard, the paper argues for an emphasis on culture using historical, cultural and post-modernist analyses. It also makes a case for the relevance of oppositional discourses in addressing and challenging patriarchal myths and 'tradition' as well as colonial patriarchy and racism expressed in global economic domination.

The Persistence of Eurocentric Paradigms: New Wines in Old Bottles

Academic interests in Africa have historically preserved colonial systems of exploitation through value-maintaining ideologies that included scientific racism. Today, a new and more insidious form of domination called globalisation, with corresponding neo-liberal paradigms, has replaced the colonial project. Since gender is an organising principle for accumulating, operating and allocating trans-national resources and privilege, concepts of the African woman continue to be central to the development of these paradigms. What is interesting is the way in which these paradigms continue to reproduce themselves.

Anthropology, the most influential discipline in African Studies, has been significant in creating and reinforcing the colonial enterprise. Anthropologists helped to develop the image of the 'savage' which, according to Macquet (1964), significantly justified colonial expansion and domination. In addition, it also houses the three main approaches that reinforced colonial domination and racism: social

Darwinism, structural/functionalism and 'acculturation' theories. The equilibrium model of the British school of structuralism-functionalism had a colonial *raison d'être*. Its analyses of 'tribal' law and order justified colonial governance of African 'natives' through 'indirect rule': a policy that was misleading, since the 'warrant chiefs' and 'district commissioners' established by the British were actually puppets of its colonial government. The equilibrium model regarded colonialism as given, thereby mystifying reality (Owosu 1975). It also ignored the destructive consequences of three centuries of trans-Atlantic slave trade involving more than 20 million Africans (Galt and Smith 1976).

Structuralism-functionalism continues to be relevant through the essentialising tendencies of the new colonialism: globalisation. This 'new and improved' international colonial economy, based on domination by a single functioning market controlled by the North, has replaced the colonial hegemony. In addition, earlier theoretical distortions, hitherto criticised as biased, myopic or based on faulty methodologies and unreliable data, have become reinforced through modernisation theory's notion of 'stages' of growth. Today, modernisation theory expresses itself through neo-liberalism, the pillar of corporate globalisation. Neo-evolutionists echo modernisation theorists' proclivity for dichotomies. Thus, conceptual frameworks applied to Africa are often presented in Eurocentric dichotomies: rural/urban, formal/informal, traditional/modern, developed/underdeveloped and so forth. Whatever the division, Africa always ended up on the lower rung of the social evolutionary ladder or other classification schemes.

The 'acculturation' model found mostly in studies of social change in Africa is not much different. It assumes the inevitability of assimilation to Western norms, values and lifestyles as a result of contact with the West. Seldom do they show Africa's impact on the West through music, religion, intellectual traditions and so forth. Acculturation studies have mainly been concerned with what Magubane refers to as 'symbols of Europeanization' and 'Westernisation' measured by European attire, occupations, education and income, and resulting in the inferiorisation of African culture, values and aesthetics.

Because colonialism was ignored, these studies also ignored the role of coercion in the process of acculturation. In effect, colonialism not only blocked indigenous processes of decision-making, it also destroyed indigenous processes of knowledge generation. The result is a form of scientific colonialism sustained by scientific racism. Historical studies were no less Eurocentric and racist. Africa was presented as having no history, no civilisation and no culture. Studies of the classical period have consistently denied the contributions of Africans to Egyptian civilisation and to the civilisations of ancient Greece¹. [See Diop (1974) and Bernal (1987) for challenges to these positions.]

Today, neo-liberal paradigms justify globalisation in much the same way as their antecedents, namely social Darwinism, modernisation theory and structural/

functionalism, justified colonialism. Liberal-oriented international relations studies privilege Western political institutions within a global political system dominated by Western capital and patriarchal ideologies (Pettman 1996).

Social science research, fashioned by colonial conquest, imperialistic designs or neo-liberal motivations, has also influenced gender studies and the feminist discourse. With the exception of Boserup (1970), who criticises gender bias in economic development, modernisation theory generally presents African women at a lower stage of development (read evolution) compared to women of the West; structuralism-functionalism imposes a functional, but essentialist, explanation in the study of gender relations. Acculturation studies have been replaced by 'women in development' or 'gender in development' studies which seek to 'integrate African women in development' by making them more like Western women.

Oppositional Discourses

Some post-colonial and post-modern discourses challenge and reframe the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the positivistic, universalizing and evolutionary tradition of Western scholarship. They explore the historical and modern imperatives of the global political economy. Revisionist historiography and the work of Diop, Bernal, UNESCO, Black Studies programs and Afro-centric paradigms are challenging the tenacity of scientific racism posing as scholarship. Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was a major milestone in this development and has been reinforced by dependency theorists. Their studies provide a basis for understanding how and why the underdevelopment of Africa has continued and how it has become intensified through corporate globalization. (Rodney 1981; Amin 1974 & 1997; Bernal 1987; Asante 1990; Amadiume 1997; Fall 1999; Pheko 2002). It is within this trajectory that gender research in Africa can yield the best results.

Eurocentric paradigms can lead to an abstract mapping of stratification systems rather than a more profound interrogation of institutions that determine such parameters of social inquiry. However, the widespread poverty among women in Africa requires an understanding of the construction of social inequality at the global level which privileges some countries and its men and women, (primarily among groups in the North) at the expense of others, notably in the South.

Corporate globalization, supported by neo-liberal paradigms, is the process that directs the market with the aim of ensuring the unfettered flow of transnational capital. In this process, nation states are rendered powerless through laws that protect multinational corporations and are regulated by the World Trade Organization. International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF impose conditionalities of structural adjustment programmes ostensibly to promote macro-economic stability while giving loans that stifle the economic growth of countries of the South. The result is a reverse resource flow of at least 14 billion U.S. dollars a year through debt servicing from Africa to the affluent

nations in the North. This is greater than the amount received in *real* international aid.

Corporate globalization increases the marginalization of African countries in the global economy. Although this process transcends gender, it certainly has gender implications. Globalization has a compounded effect on women due to structural disadvantages in the global and national division of labour and inequalities in the distribution of assets and power. Since most models are linked to political conquest through colonialism and corporate conquest through globalization, oppositional discourses inherent in various forms of Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and post-modernism are still relevant to African gender research.

Feminists of Africa and the South Challenge Eurocentric Paradigms

The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) was among the earliest women's organizations of the South to adopt a critical approach to research, challenging Eurocentric paradigms from a feminist and post-colonial perspective. As early as the mid 1970s, it called for the de-colonization of research and established a critical gender research agenda. It also has a major research agenda on globalization (Fall 1999). In the mid 1980s, following the lead of AAWORD, the Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), a research organization of women of the South also challenged the destructive neo-liberal model of development and its impact on women of the South.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars of colour in the South and North led an intellectual movement that challenged essentialist notions of womanhood while insisting on recognizing and interrogating difference. Crucial to this task was the need to understand how the social location of women is determined by race, ethnicity, class, status and access to privilege. Those at the lower end of the scale face powerlessness, exclusion, despair and vulnerabilities. Such constructions of social inequality confer power on some at the expense of others. (Steady 1981; Sen and Grown 1986; Essed 1990; Mohanty 1991; Imam et al. 1997).

Methodological challenges in investigating gender

There are some fundamental assumptions in investigation of gender that do not fit the African reality, even when controlling for African diversity. One is the belief in the universal subordination of women. Another is the separation of the public and private spheres into gendered spheres, giving men an advantage for participating in the public sphere while seeking to explain asymmetrical relations between men and women.

To believe the universal subordination argument would imply ignoring how social location through race, ethnicity, class, colour and so forth confers power

and privilege. However, we need to question the sensitivity of the research tools used to investigate 'subordination' and the methodological approaches used to apply it cross-culturally. The 'universal subordination of women' argument forces us to settle for the highly contested notion that 'biology is destiny'. But we must ask the following questions: Whose biology? Whose destiny? Is all female biology socially constructed the same way? What if they come in different colours? What if they are stunted by poverty and malnutrition? What if they are subject to trafficking like a commodity? What if they cannot carry a foetus to full term because of poor health? Similarly, if gender is a metaphor for power relations, how do we define power? Do all men have power? Do some women have power? How are the people with the most power socially constructed?

In many African societies, power is not only vested in political organizations. Other social institutions can confer power on people. For example, women can derive power from their position in religious systems, in female secret societies, such as the Sande of Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as through their roles as mothers, especially when the society is matrilineal or has matrifocal ideologies.

The 1980s' post-modernist challenge by feminist scholars of the South included serious critiques of the right of Western feminists to assume authority on feminist discourses. They also questioned the latter's essentialising proclivities that disregard race, nationality and so forth. Along these lines, Mohanty (1985) interrogated the production of 'Third World Women' as a homogeneous category in Western feminist texts, and as subaltern subjects. Nnaemeka (1998) centred on the tendency of lumping all women in one basket without clarifying who is being spoken about and who is speaking for whom, or who has greater credibility in framing the issue.

Problems of framing are also problematic when filtered through racist and sexist biases. For example, Narayan (1997 & 1995), writing on women of India, challenges the tendency to use so called 'cultural' explanations of practices like sati and dowry murders in India while ignoring murders due to domestic violence in the United States. This has led to the visibility of dowry murder in India and the comparative invisibility of domestic violence murders in the United States. Again, while not condoning harmful cultural practices with patriarchal origins, genital surgical interventions in Africa have been over sensationalized. African women are presented as savages or damaged victims worthy of nothing better than scorn. At the same time, harmful plastic surgery to reconstruct healthy vaginas, breasts and other body parts in the West are ignored. Also ignored, is the fact that they are also responding to cultural dictates that define the ideology of womanhood. Western plastic surgery, as Foucault (1992) would put it, is an example of 'docile bodies' succumbing to the coercive pressures of Western patriarchal culture.

African women and the 'gender' problematique

The term 'gender' is a highly contested concept when applied to Africa. Like other systems of thought, it has been exported to the South as a concept, an analytical tool and as a policy initiative. Western domination has also become apparent in the use of the term 'gender'. It is well established in development circles of the United Nations which influence the agenda and budget of national governments and even academic research. Because it is Western, 'gender' tends to be myopic, obscuring other differences. It reveals white Western middle class biases and obscures other differences based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and so forth. In this regard, it fails to recognize the role of women themselves in other structures of oppression.

'Gender' is analogous to difference but contains within it notions of inequality. It is often viewed as a metaphor representing relations of power. However, analysis of power is usually restricted to male/female power relations only, ignoring power relations based on race, class, ethnicity, age, nationality and so forth. Thus the various ways in which gender has been used, namely, as a basic organizing principle of society; as a heuristic tool, as a crucial site for the application of dichotomous models and as an indicator of progress in the development process have to be questioned.

As I pointed out in the introduction to the book *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981), within a racist political/economic hegemony, White women can become primary oppressors. It is now widely accepted that women are a non-essentialist category and represent diverse groups with different social locations. 'Gender' can therefore mean different things to different people since it carries the ideologies of the socio-cultural context in which it is constructed.

Furthermore, the term 'gender' tends to represent a proclivity towards dichotomous models that do not often fully represent the African reality, although exceptions can be found. For example, a study of cultural boundaries and social interactions in Africa has argued that trans-social and transactional cultural flows are inherently gendered and that gender is a crucial site of intersection between 'inside' and 'outside'. (Grosz-Ngate and Kobole 1999: 8).

Two major examples challenging the concept of 'gender' in Africa

African societies are complex and recognize exceptions to general normative rules. They use concepts that convey a cyclical ordering of social life in addition to oppositional and hierarchical ones or those based on biological classification. For instance, changes in lifecycle can alter women's status so that postmenopausal women can assume political functions and serve as elders and advisers on the same basis as men. Similarly, female ancestors can share equal status with male ancestors, while 'third genders' 'agendered' and 'trans-gendered entities' and 'alternative genders' have been discovered in many parts of the non-Western world.

In Africa, institutions such as 'woman marriage' and the ambiguity of the gender of some deities have challenged the dichotomous model of the West.

Major challenges of the term 'gender' have come from African women, the most celebrated of whom are Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi. Amadiume's book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) was ground breaking in deconstructing the word 'gender' in the Igbo context. In her analysis of sex-gender distinctions, she exposes what she described as the racism and ethnocentrism of earlier studies of Igbo society by Western scholars. She convincingly demonstrates how misleading biological categories can be in studying sex and gender since either sex can assume socially viable roles as male or female.

In *The Invention of Women* (1997), Oyewumi challenges the heavy reliance of Western scholarship on what is seen as 'world view' rather than what is perceived through other senses or 'world sense'. She argues that although 'gender' is deemed to be socially constructed, biology itself is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social. Hence the separation between 'sex' and 'gender' is superficial since 'sex' itself has elements of construction. She insists that this 'biologisation' inherent in the Western articulation of social difference is by no means universal. It has been imposed on other cultures through imperialism.

Oyewumi argues that 'Gender' only became important in Yoruba studies because Yoruba life, past and present, has been translated into English to fit the Western pattern of body-reasoning. This pattern is one in which gender is omnipresent, the male the norm, and the female the exception: it is a pattern in which power is believed to inhere in maleness in and of itself. It is a pattern that is not grounded in evidence (1997: 30). Western dominance in the conceptualization of research problems and in social theory has also resulted in the privileging of gender over seniority in the written discourse of the Yoruba. Contrary to this, Oyewumi shows that, in Yoruba society, seniority takes precedence over gender and many Yoruba such as *oba* or *alafin* nouns are gender-free. She maintained that male and female had multiple identities not based on anatomy in pre-colonial societies and the creation of 'woman' as a differential category was specifically attributable to the colonial enterprise. For females, therefore, colonization was a two-fold process of racial inferiorisation and gender subordination (Oyewumi 1997: 124).

The Need for Alternatives: African-Focused and Gender-Sensitive Methodologies

Critical assessment and challenge of Eurocentric models in the study of women in Africa is certainly necessary. In this regard, oppositional discourses inherent in various forms of Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and post-modernism are still relevant to African gender research. Given the diversity of Africa, theoretical applications have to be developed through dynamic, multi-dimensional and heterogeneous approaches that are adjusted for contextual validity. Yet, it is

quite legitimate to speak of an African perspective or an African reality even if only one or two African countries are indicated. This type of typological projection can become a valid heuristic tool.

It is also important to link theory and praxis. Given the empirical reality of poverty, economic exploitation and marginality, theory for the majority of Africans is a luxury. The thrust towards praxis will expose and centralize invisibility, voicelessness causing autogenic social processes to act and change retrograde developments. It will also help to reconcile universal and post-modernist tensions.

However, the low priority given to social science research and brain drain have given rise to an inadequate number of researchers in Africa and a weak database in African gender research. In fact, the challenge goes beyond resources and available capacity, to issues around development and institutionalisation of standards. For example, African research on gender has to develop methodologies for criticisms and revisionist endeavours as well as methodologies for alternative research. The same standards for data gathering that will satisfy basic scientific requirements of validity, reliability and replicability have to be applied. Added to this will be new methods related to language and to indigenous systems of thought so that gender will be examined within the context of the relationship of language to culture.

In redefining an alternative Afrocentric approach to research the following are crucial:

- Policy-orientation
- Critique of donor-driven research
- Social impact and basic research
- Viewpoint and value orientation
- Time orientation
- Geographical orientation
- Levels of analysis
- An emphasis on culture.

All of these factors will be conditioned by the type of problem to be investigated, the kinds of data available, research instruments to be employed and the need to prioritize the research problems to be investigated (Steady 1977). We now examine these factors below.

Policy orientation

Western scholarship places a high value on theory and theory-building at the expense of pragmatism and relevance. Hence higher prestige is given to theoreticians. Lack of interest in practical problems, combined with an emphasis on researcher's professional advancement, often results in insensitivity to the people

studied. Over 40 years ago, in what he called 'scientific colonialism', a European scholar, Galtung (1967), compared the researcher who extracts data for professional profit to the colonialist who exports the resources out of Africa. In the following analogy, he demonstrates a parallel between the two systems of extraction and processing:

to export data about the country to one's own country for processing into manufactured goods', such as books and articles... is essentially similar to what happens when raw materials are exported at a low price and re-imported as manufactured goods at a very high cost. The most important, most rewarding and most difficult phase of the process takes place abroad (1967: 296).

For Africa, there are many economic and social problems which theory or the non-pragmatic export of data cannot solve. These include its dependency on the West and its marginalization through globalization.

Critique of donor-driven research

The research agenda for gender studies in Africa is externally-driven by neo-liberal and globalization priorities that reinforce the re-colonization of African social science. Considering the continent's economic difficulties and low salaries of faculty, the pursuit of research funds may dominate academic activities, while the resultant donor-driven research can undermine programmes. Examples include gender research priorities concerned with fertility regulation or female circumcision rather than to global economic forces and liberalization policies that increase malnutrition and poverty. In addition, inadequate attention is given to the dumping of guns, other lethal weapons, drugs, pornographic material and dirty technologies in Africa; the illegal trafficking of young girls from Africa to Europe, to be used as prostitutes and domestic servants under slavery-like conditions. The destructive impact of debt, structural adjustment policies, unemployment, export-oriented industries, sex tourism and so forth are also often overlooked.

On another front, some research on health care, nutrition, agricultural production, migration and education may, in fact, be designed to promote neo-liberal policies geared towards making African markets and labour more accessible to exploitation. African researchers therefore have to be critical of donor-driven and donor-sponsored research, especially various projects sponsored by international donor agencies.

Social impact and basic research

Social impact research is critical. A number of studies can be conducted as intensive micro-level studies for purposes of evaluating the impact of 'development projects in small communities'. Although a number of international projects build

in evaluation components, such assessments need not have local input and may reflect the vested interest of certain interest groups abroad. It is important that evaluative research be given a high priority by African social scientists.

Micro-level research can also be conducted as basic research with policy implications. Intensive research, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, is most useful and can yield relevant information and valid conclusions. Intensive social surveys can provide useful information about food and income distribution as well as demographic changes. They can also present a good profile of the health status of a community. For example, it can lead to a clearer evaluation of the fertility rates in a given country by taking cognizance of factors such as infertility, infant mortality and mortality from the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as fertility. Governments will then be presented with realistic projections on which to base a population policy.

Viewpoint and value orientation

The researcher is not a neutral observer. He or she brings existentialist limitations to the scholarly endeavour. The values and biases of the researcher are inevitably injected into the research. A researcher has a certain obligation to become involved in the realities and problems of the 'subjects' under study. Research in Africa has to be geared towards a certain degree of involvement and inter-subjectivity. The aim should be to contribute to improving the life of the people studied rather than to exploit them for professional advancement. Very often there is indifference and a patronizing attitude to the 'subjects' of research, especially when the researcher is a foreigner with vested professional interests outside of Africa. Very few researchers bring back results of their study to the community or give anything back. The subject/object or insider/outsider dichotomy is increasingly being challenged by both Western and scholars from the South. Most scholars of the South now insist on the study of culture from the inside by an insider.

The overriding problem facing Africa today is that of the destruction of African societies by forces of corporate globalization resulting in poverty, illiteracy and disease. The major mission of any scholarly endeavour in the social sciences should be the elimination of the conditions that produce massive poverty and human misery among the masses of African people. The new researcher has to be involved in improving the well being of African people. Involvement would necessitate abandoning the subject/object dichotomy of social science to one of inter-subjectivity with elements of advocacy, protest and social engineering. Such approaches will also necessarily be multidisciplinary, policy-oriented and participatory both for the researcher and the people being studied. This would also demystify the research process itself, since data gathering procedures will be linked to problem solving and can be participatory.

Quantitative and mathematical research instruments designed for use in more technologically complex societies may have limited relevance when applied to Africa. They may also be more prone to bias due to the variability of the research capacity and database. Research instruments, data-collecting and data-analyzing procedures have to be sensitively designed and made uncomplicated to encourage participation and involvement and to have practical relevance. Research methodology from an African perspective has to be partisan- i.e. dedicated to the progress and advancement of the African people. An appropriate value orientation would lead to research formulations and projects that are problem solving, action and policy oriented, and focused on the improvement of the African condition.

Time orientation

The African worldview encompasses dimensions of the past, present and future. The dead, the living and those yet to be born are considered essential for maintaining cosmological balance. This balance has been destabilized, with important gender implications, particularly the loss of social status for women not only in the political and economic spheres, but also in the realm of ritual and religion. Emphasis should therefore be given to an analysis of social processes on a continuum that will involve the past, the present and the future. A historical perspective will be essential in understanding the role of conquest and colonization in shaping the themes and trajectory of research in Africa as well as in developing new forms of colonization such as corporate globalization. In this way, urbanization and social change can be seen as a distortion of African indigenous development through economic domination, not an inevitable process of modernization.

Geographical orientation: incorporating the African diaspora

African is no longer confined to a geographical entity. The Transatlantic slave trade led to the dispersal of Africans on a massive scale. Today, Africans move as migrants, refugees and international civil servants to all parts of the world. The study of Africa must now include 'Global Africa' in all its historical, socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions. In a book I edited recently, this concept was central to an analysis of Black Women of Africa and the African Diaspora within the current international political economy. I advanced the notion of African Feminism as a theory and praxis for the liberation of African women from gender-based discrimination compounded by racism, the legacy of colonialism, and the injustices of the international political economy (Steady 2002).

Levels of analysis

Research efforts of African scholars must continue to study the theoretical and political implication of oppositional discourses and methodologies in the con-

text of Africa. A useful orientation in terms of level of analysis is one that combines macro-and micro-levels of analysis within a given national or international boundary. This orientation can be used to demonstrate larger systems of interaction that exist between the rural and urban areas. Thus, rural and urban areas can be seen as systems in a larger framework rather than as fossilized units presented in monographs. This perspective of rural/urban interaction is missing in most studies of Africa. The interconnectedness of phenomena across broad spatial domains has also been absent from most studies of African urbanization.

Orientations that show dynamic interactions rather than atomized unitary systems are essential to understanding the fluidity of the African social situation where linkages exist among the political, economic and cultural systems, between rural and urban areas, and even between countries and sub-regions. This orientation will also facilitate pan-African research and the strengthening of African research networks designed to build capacity for indigenous research in similar problems across Africa. A continuum must also be maintained between the macro-and micro-level, the holistic and particular. In order to understand the position of Africa within the international economic system and the historical conditions that shaped the relationship of inequality between the rich and the poor nations, a macro-level perspective of global dimensions is useful.

Here, we need to re-examine neo-Marxism in the context of Africa. Its theoretical and political significance in social science research ought to be given greater attention because it will increase our understating of how forms of imperialist domination affect a country regarding means of production, property ownership and the relationship between class, gender and the family. We need to study the relationship of imported ideologies, religions, educational systems and other aspects of the superstructure to the oppression of the African masses. The South has produced eminent scholars who have articulated this view.

An emphasis on culture

Culture is a collective pattern of living conveying the norms and values handed down from generation to generation in any society. It is dynamic and resilient, and has positive, negative and neutral attributes. Culture has valuable and positive assets and provides effective models for gender research that can lead to the empowerment and advancement of African women. However, because culture represents routine behaviour that carries norms and values of a society, it is often not easily changed. The study of African cultures have to include an inquiry into the continuities of gender discrimination and to determine where the cultural, historical, gendered and racial markers uphold, distort and undermine the 'real' and the 'authentic'.

Okeke (2000) has argued against viewing gender discrimination inherent in cultural practices as acceptable because it is the 'tradition'. She shows how patri-

archal continuities, even when they contain contradictions, can support claims of the rightness of tradition. For example, the contradictions between statutory and customary law, and the weaknesses in statutory law, can lead to the strengthening of traditional justifications that still privilege men in relation to property rights, inheritance laws, and so forth. This can result in 'relations of power which keep in place an inequitable social structure that privileges the dominant gender' (2000: 6).

In her study of gendered racism in Europe, Essed (2002) has shown how everyday racism interweaves racism in daily routine in such a way that racial injustices seem normal and expected. She notes that the focus on everyday manifestation of systemic inequality extends outside the field of race relations as well. This contributed to granting 'the everyday' generic meaning, everyday inequalities, everyday sexism' (2002: 210)

An examination of the role of gender in the socio-cultural construction of hierarchies and hierarchy sustaining structures has to continue as an important research agenda for African social science. For example, the gender implications of the legacies of colonialism, apartheid and racism have only been systematically studied within the last 20 years. We still do not have comprehensive studies of the central role of gender in armed conflict, civil wars and the erosion of the African state.

Gender-based analyses are also important in our understanding of the patriarchal myth sustaining globalization forces' privileging men in cases of land privatization and market liberalization while creating alliances among men that ordinarily would be enemies on the basis of other divisions like East/West, North/South or White/Non-White.

The 1981 definition of African feminism outlined the value of African women in the ideological, institutional and customary realms. Women's power bases are partly derived from cultural values that stress the potency of a female principle governing life and reproduction through motherhood and the centrality of children. Women can also control political and ritual spaces. Women's indigenous groups can provide important leveraging mechanisms for women and are instrumental in promoting sustainable development projects. So rather than dismiss African cultures as archaic, we need to conduct more studies using culture as the paradigmatic framework that has the potential of producing action-oriented research capable of transforming society and empowering women.

The Continuing Relevance of Oppositional Discourses: The political economy paradigm

The major problem confronting most women in Africa today is poverty. This compounds their lack of access to strategic resources, facilities, basic literacy and

economic and political decision-making. In addition, they are faced with health and nutritional problems, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic and deteriorating environments that can no longer sustain them. In order to fully comprehend and address the deepening poverty in Africa, we require a comprehensive study of its causes and consequences, in addition to the circumstances leading to its chronic and protracted nature. Analysis of the structure, conditions and processes involved in the production and reproduction of poverty must be conducted in its spatial and temporal context as well as from a cross-cultural perspective within Africa.

Globalization facilitates the movement of capital across national boundaries. It is characterized by a deepening of markets across borders aided by communication technologies, international laws and the monitoring role of the World Trade Organization. It uses traditional institutions, the informal labour market and women's labour to facilitate the process of forging a 'single market' dominated by the North. It affects countries differently: while some countries are experiencing growth and market integration, others, especially Africa and countries of the South, are being marginalized. The term 'market apartheid' has been applied to this process. Inequality has increased between and within countries. Even the World Bank, one of the sponsors of globalization paints a dismal picture in its *World Development Indicators* (2000):

One sixth of the world's population produces 78% of the world's goods and services and get 78% of the world's income, an average of \$70 per day. Three-fifths of the world's people in the six poorest countries receive 6% of the world's income; less than \$2 a day. However, this poverty goes beyond income. While 7 out of 1,000 children die before age 5 in high-income countries, more than 90 out of 1,000 die in low-income countries.

The Human Development Report (1999) showed an increase in inequality between countries. It stated that within the past decade, the number of individuals in Eastern Europe and Central Asia living on less than U.S. \$1 rose to 13 million. When we add 35 million in South Asia and those in sub-Saharan Africa, the number actually tripled to 39 million. The World Bank figures are even higher. They indicate that between 1987 and 2000, the number of people living on \$1 or less (65 cents) a day, in sub-Saharan Africa alone, increased by more than 80 million. One can only imagine the gender implications when compounded with gender-based discrimination. Macro-economic policies often make gender disaggregated impacts difficult to assess because of the way in which they are conceptualized and the focus on official policy rather than the realities on the ground.

According to Dembele, "One of the most dramatic impacts of trade and investment liberalization in Africa has been the weakening, even the collapse of many African states. Among the factors that contributed to this collapse are the huge revenue losses, resulting from sweeping trade and investment liberalization" (Dembele 2002: 78). African countries experience huge losses in revenues from import taxes from which they derive 90 per cent of their fiscal revenues. The losses have meant greater dependence of up to 80 per cent of their budget on external sources. In fact, Dembele further informs us that sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where poverty has steadily increased during the last two decades and all development indicators reveal a continuing deterioration. Trade liberalization is a major contributor to this human crisis.

In spite of these grim realities, the international community controlled by the North and the IMF and World Bank, the major international financial institutions continue to promote market liberalization and privatization policies as the best strategies for poverty reduction. The mantra is 'trade not aid'. Free trade is now well recognized as being anything but free, and trade liberalization is viewed as a major contributor to poverty in Africa with serious gender implications.

The political economy approach offers one of the best explanatory models for fully understanding the political-economic structures shaping gender relations in Africa. Trade liberalization and globalization emphasize market ascendancy and diminished roles for the state. Yet, the private sector is notoriously gender-biased. The public sector has been most advantageous for women's formal sector employment. However, structural adjustment policies, almost universally recommended for sub-Saharan African governments by these international financial institutions, mandate retrenchment in the public sector and cut-backs in the social sector, such as health and education, that are of extreme importance to women. It is no wonder that Pheko (2002) urges African women to be aware of the dangers of trade liberalization and resist it. She writes:

As women, we need to continue applying a gender analysis to all trade agreements and globalization processes. The human rights analysis should also be applied while strong South/South dialogue among women should be promoted, especially regarding the impact of international trade and macroeconomic policies, in particular, their formulation and implementation. African women should also call into question, the liberalization and globalization agenda by building civil society's understanding of the issues and by bringing about mass mobilization in a global, regional and coordinated fashion (p. 105).

Conclusion

African feminist inquiries have articulated the strong link between Western neo-liberalism and European domination. These are reflected in colonial oppression and corporate globalization and bolstered by racist ideologies and institutions. There is therefore a need for a revisionist analysis of external concepts, canonical theories, methodologies and paradigms that have hitherto distorted gender studies in Africa. As well, a critical examination of gendered readings of mainstream Western research in science, history and the social sciences from an African perspective is required. So is the need for an African feminism that will reflect the paradigmatic complexity of gender research in Africa.

African feminism, as I define a brand of it, operates within a global political economy in which sexism cannot be isolated from the larger political and economic processes responsible for the exploitation and oppression of both men and women. The result is a kind of feminism that is transformative in human and social terms, rather than in personal, individualistic and sexist terms (Steady 1981). Given this orientation, the following are among important research questions to be asked:

- How does an academic context, shaped by the injustices of transatlantic slavery, colonialism and imperialism, and justified by racist and sexist stereotypes and myths about Africa and Africans, affect gender research in Africa?
- How relevant is the Eurocentric search for universal women's oppression, when other forms of oppression based on race, nationalism, ethnicity, class and so forth, and committed by the global economy, threaten the very existence of most Africans?
- How do pressures of globalization and the market economy impact on social institutions such as marriage, the family, male/female relations and positive and negative cultural practices?
- How has the donor community influenced the research agenda of Africa and distorted African realities based on preconceived assumptions and biases?
- How do we deepen our understanding of the importance of matrifocal traditions of Africa of which Diop wrote, and the dynamic interplay between these traditions and patriarchal systems, especially the modernization of patriarchal domination through globalization?
- How is the link between women's roles in production and reproduction significant in understanding the continuities between the public and the private spheres, in the context of a rapidly changing political economy and a socio-cultural crisis of major proportions?
- How are gender relations in the domestic sphere supporting or impeding women's decision-making and control over their lives?
- To what extent are African women's bodies becoming commercialized, and a potential target for trafficking and violence, in the age of globalization?

- How is the HIV/AIDS epidemic affecting notions of sexuality, fertility, gender relations, well-being and collective survival in Africa?

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'Yorubas Don't Do Gender':
A Critical Review of Oyeronke
Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women:
Making an African Sense
of Western Gender Discourses**

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf

Discourses on Africa, especially those refracted through the prism of developmentalism, promote gender analysis as indispensable to the economic and political development of the African future. Conferences, books, policies, capital, energy and careers have been made in its name. Despite this, there has been very little interrogation of the concept in terms of its relevance and applicability to the African situation. Instead, gender functions as a given: it is taken to be a cross-cultural organising principle. Recently, some African scholars have begun to question the power of gender to explain African societies (Amadiume 1997; Okome 2001; Nzegwu 2001). This challenge came out of the desire to produce concepts grounded in African thought and everyday lived realities. These scholars hope that by focusing on an African episteme they will avoid any dependency on European theoretical paradigms and therefore eschew what Babalola Olabiyi Yai (1999) has called 'dubious universals' and 'intransitive discourses'.

Some of the key questions that have been raised include: can gender, or indeed patriarchy, be applied to non-Euro-American cultures? Can we assume that social relations in all societies are organised around biological sex difference? Is the male body in African societies seen as normative and therefore a conduit for the exercise of power? Is the female body inherently subordinate to the male body? What are the implications of introducing a gendered perspective as a starting point for the construction of knowledge about African societies?¹ What are the advantages and disadvantages of using explanatory categories de-