2011 | what does it mean to do feminist research in African contexts?

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introduction

Feminist scholars in the African region have spent the last decade working collaboratively with writers and activists at various locations on the continent to build an intellectual community, around the shared goal of strengthening the feminist politics of gender studies in African universities. Many challenges confront this kind of work. Systemic challenges arise from the domination of global policy arenas by narrow neo-liberal discourses that uncritically privilege the role of the market in driving development. Unstable and undemocratic national and local political environments pose challenges to academic freedom and constrain intellectual cultures through direct censorship, as well as through sustained climates of intimidation and threat that lead many scholars to censor themselves, and avoid teaching or researching potentially contentious issues (Imam and Mama, 1994; Sall, 2000). At the institutional level, Africa's universities remain steeped in patriarchal institutional cultures in which women are generally vastly outnumbered, and their intellectual contribution relegated to the fringes or steadfastly ignored (Mama, 2005; Mama and Barnes, 2007a). We have entered the twenty-first century faced with renewed global economic crisis, with surging militarization and with intensifying cultural and religious fundamentalisms, which threaten the best advances made by democratic and feminist struggles during the late-twentieth century. This global climate is likely to continue to negatively affect intellectual landscapes and academic freedom, unless locally grounded efforts are made to sustain and strengthen liberatory scholarship, including feminist scholarship. In the African region, where the university sector is largely publicly supported, the diminution (and in some cases collapse) of the state and the retraction of public sector funding have been little short of disastrous. In the long run, a weakened university sector has negative consequences, as it diminishes national and regional capacities for critically interrogating the hegemonic and neo-liberal approaches to development that have deepened global inequalities, sustained the impoverishment of large swaths of the continent, and failed

to yield either social justice or gender equality for the majority of Africans. Nonetheless, since the 1980s, feminists have leveraged open some small but important spaces for the articulation of critical gender perspectives in African universities. Indeed, the energetic levels of activism sustained within and beyond the academies and other public institutions suggest that feminist thinkers in Africa have been more inspired than deterred by the arduous local conditions facing women across much of the continent. Much of this activism has drawn on the repertoires of international feminism, which generally takes the pursuit and exchange of knowledge across contexts and borders seriously.

In what follows I reflect on the politics and experiences of building a feminist intellectual community in the African region over the last decade or so, highlighting some specific efforts to define and pursue feminist research.

the feminist African intellectual community

The experience that informs these reflections derives from a major project to strengthen gender and women's studies, initiated out of the African Gender Institute (AGI) early in 2000. Located at the University of Cape Town, the AGI was established soon after the successful overthrow of White minority rule and the establishment of the first African National Congress-led government, at a time when Africans still had enormous goodwill towards South Africa, as it was. The idea of setting up the Africa-wide Gender Institute, and the decision to base it at the formerly White and relatively well-resourced University of Cape Town, were therefore all about including South Africa in the pan-African intellectual community and overcoming years of isolation, while also facilitating Black and African women's access to historically White and patriarchal academic institutions. In this context it was remarkable only because the academic main-stream of South Africa was far more interested in pursuing links with the more prestigious universities of Europe and North America. The gender and women's studies project was thus about realizing the AGI's core commitment to 'building knowledges for gender equality' in African contexts.

It began with a series of intellectual networking and outreach activities to develop feminist thinking and pedagogies rooted in and responsive to African contexts and conditions. This continued African feminists' longer standing critical engagements with the international development industry and the social science community, the history of which can be traced back to the formation of the Association of African Women for Research and Development as early as 1982, and in the growth of gender studies teaching research that was evident by the 1990s (Mama 1995; Imam and Mama, 1997). The AGI's initiative took shape in 2000, and began by updating previous reviews on the main theoretical trends and directions of the field of gender and women's studies (Lewis, 2003), and

a survey of the institutional strength of existing studies in universities across the region.

Between 2000 and 2002 we located and surveyed thirty dedicated units doing some form of teaching and/or research in GWS. While it was clear that the field was growing, our mapping exercise also revealed the isolation and precariousness of gender and women's studies units, and the conservative intellectual and institutional terrain that was constraining the emergence of a coherent body of locally grounded feminist scholarship.

Higher education reform was underway, with contradictory effects on women and on the field of gender and women's studies. These can not be detailed here, beyond noting that, on the one hand, the overall impoverishment of students and faculty and the loss of resources undermined the quality and inclusivity of African higher education, while on the other hand, some remedial donor funding was made available to support individual women to study science. Gender and women's studies units were able to attract a limited amount of donor assistance, giving rise to a rather erroneous perception among some university administrators that such units might serve to attract funds into resource-starved institutions. Particularly striking, however, was the scattered nature of the pool of scholars doing gender studies in African universities. Most of us were mostly working away in isolation, in small under-resourced units with very few opportunities to collaborate or think collectively. The occasional international grants came in, with well-intentioned expatriate experts attached, and this compounded local perceptions of gender and women's studies as externally orchestrated and irrelevant to local African contexts.

In terms of intellectual content our reviews found that much of the teaching and research being undertaken by the existing units reflected an integrative 'women in development (WID)' industry approach rather than a critical feminist perspective. Indeed, as the mapping process proceeded, we became clearer about the need to engage critically with the predominance of instrumental work that serviced the development industry in depoliticized ways that focused on narrow, technical gender analysis, geared to the production of gender-training manuals and services. While these may have been practically useful tools of the trade for those who became professionalized gender experts concerned to integrate WID, they were also disengaged from transformative feminist ideas and social justice agendas, not to mention the increasingly disparate women's movements. During the final years of the twentieth century, the immense material and political challenges arising from neo-liberal globalization and resurgent religious fundamentalism, as well as the outbreaks of a series of violent and bloody conflicts that disrupted women's lives in particularly horrific ways, all highlighted the limitations of development servicing. Feminist thinkers therefore realized the urgency of strengthening more critical feminist approaches that could better support feminist movements and sustain activism to challenge the contemporary

manifestations of historically rooted patterns of subordination and oppression. The need to develop independent and locally grounded feminist collaborations across the region was thus powerfully felt at the turn of the century.

The AGI thus set out to collectively renew and pursue feminist commitments, taking the field of gender and women's studies as a key strategic site. The pedagogic and methodological strategies that allowed us to pursue these broad commitments were not predefined, but were allowed to emerge and develop as the work proceeded in the reflective spaces that the AGI convened.

The first such space was a 2002 workshop, held in Cape Town, that brought forty women from over a dozen African nations together to begin the work of sharing diverse experiences of initiating and institutionalizing GWS in Africa, and to develop an intellectual agenda that reflected the bringing together of our various pan-African and feminist perspectives (AGI, 2002). We envisioned a rich and vibrant intellectual community of feminist scholars empowered to advance feminist scholarship and activism regardless of the often unfavourable (if not hostile) institutional and political environments. We committed to reaffirming and advancing the radical and transformative intellectual traditions of the continent. It was an extremely exciting moment.

The ensuing period saw the AGI working with various partners across the region to pursue this agenda through a series of curriculum, research and publication projects that served as spaces for working to develop African-grounded approaches to feminist pedagogy and methodology. Continental, sub-regional and national workshops and working meetings involving various activist groups and GWS units all over the region have worked together on feminist pedagogy and curriculum development, and developed new feminist research projects, examples of which are discussed below.

We worked with an idea of activist scholarship that was both globally informed and locally grounded, taking its cues from international feminist movements, as well as from the history of diverse women's struggles in the region, using shared reflection to generate locally grounded critical engagements with feminist theories, pedagogies and curriculums. For tactical reasons, the funding proposals we developed did not use the overtly political language of 'feminism' 'anti-imperialism' or 'neo-liberalism' but used the more neutral language of 'gender' and 'locally grounded' knowledge building, so that the initial proposal was pragmatically entitled 'Strengthening Gender and Women's Studies for Africa's Transformation'.[1] The key strategy for pursing the broad goal of strengthening feminism involved developing closer synergies between the academic and activist arenas, by bringing feminist scholars, activists and activist-scholars from East, West and Southern Africa together in a series of curriculum meetings and research projects.

1 By 2000 the term transformation was already in everyday parlance in South Africa, so this was relatively 'neutral' terminology. We

Feminism in Africa is extremely heterogeneous as it bears the marks of having been forged in quite diverse colonial contexts (British, French, Portuguese, Italian, Belgian, Spanish), and influenced by a multiplicity of civilizations, Islamic, Christian and indigenous, before being further shaped by an array of anti-colonial and nationalist movements. Since independence, feminism in Africa has been diversified by the range of political regimes (from multiparty, state socialist, capitalist, civilian and military dictatorships), not to mention the influence of the Cold War, various conflicts and other forms of instability. Across all these conditions there have also been diverse approaches to national development coming up with their own gender policy regimes, but often subject to international influences. The majority of nations have not been substantively researched or documented. However, there is enough evidence to say that there are numerous women's mobilizations ongoing in almost every country in the region. However, it is also clear that not all of these were pursuing feminist agendas. Mobilizations of women can be directed by political parties, religious and other conservative forces, and many still distance themselves from any notion of women's rights or feminism. For example, in a single country like Nigeria, strong independent movements — such as the movement concerned with overcoming military rule and building up women's participation women in politics — have had a rather fraught coexistence with state-directed organizations led by military officers' wives to support the dictatorship, organizations that uphold party lines over women's rights and religious organizations that participate in the regulation of women's freedom and mobility.

International development discourses have also shaped the various manifestations of feminism in Africa. 'Developmental feminism' which I loosely characterize as the product of the ongoing engagements between feminism and the development industry has often focused on integrating women into the mainstream institutions and decision making. It is most salient in those countries that have been most strongly dependent on development assistance. This essentially liberal discourse addresses gender inequality through integration — WID, Women and Development (WAD), and gender mainstreaming — and is frequent currency in national and international policy arenas that remain largely hostile to feminism. The term 'feminism' in contrast clearly connotes a more critical stance on the continued subordination and marginalization of women despite decades of 'WID' work. Feminist perspectives on development include commitments to ending systemic oppression, demanding sexual and reproductive rights and full and equal political citizenship, and transforming gender relations at personal and household levels, as well as in public arenas. Second, feminism (in and beyond Africa) refers to a degree of organizational and intellectual autonomy, which means the space to articulate analyses and political agendas rooted in clear analysis of the material and cultural conditions of women's lives. Autonomy is important because it distinguishes feminist movements from directed mobilizations

preferred the word 'strengthening' to 'capacity-building' as it better conveyed our respect for the historical capacities and resourcefulness that is generally erased in development discourse.

of women by governments, international agencies, political parties and movements, religious bodies and social movements, all of which have set up proxies, such as 'women's wings' 'women's desks', branches or chapters, that are defined not by the change they bring to women's lives but by mobilizing women to service a wider, usually male-led, cause. Third, feminism refers to a movement tradition of women's organizing that is broadly non-hierarchical, participatory and democratic, promoting egalitarian institutional cultures characterized by an ethos of respect and solidarity between women.[2]

2 The work of Molyneaux (1998) initially carried out in reference to Nicaragua, and its later development by Shireen Hassim (2007) in reference to South Africa have informed this discussion.

Diversity notwithstanding, it is possible to identify feminists in African contexts as those women who are unapologetically committed to radically transforming the unequal gender relations that continue to be a pervasive feature of African social realities, and to working across the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, class and creed, and to upholding women's right to bodily and sexual integrity as reflected in the African Feminist Charter (2006). 'Feminist, no ifs or buts' has become the main slogan of the African Feminist Forum, signalling the new level of assertiveness now manifest in Africa's feminist community, over a decade after the start of the AGI-led initiative.

The approach that the AGI and its partners developed from 2000 onwards took both gender and women's studies in universities and the women's movements they look to as feminist 'works in progress', and the methodological strategy relied on bringing them together. The working assumption was that bringing the ideas and practices of feminists working inside universities into closer dialogue with those working outside them in various communities and organizations would strengthen and reradicalize both feminist theory and feminist practice. The AGI therefore set out to create supportive spaces that brought theory and practice together. In these meetings feminist approaches to scholarship and activism would be discussed and reflected on, and contradictions surfaced, contextualized and explored. Broad feminist principles were invoked insofar as they could inform the development of intellectual-activist synergies that would advance radical feminist agendas, within and beyond the academy.

The information access and publishing challenges facing African scholars were addressed through the establishment of a dedicated website offering feminist intellectual resources and publications originating in Africa, often the hardest to procure (www.gwsafrica.org). The community-building goal was addressed through the establishment of a listserv that grew to involve over 300 members, most based on the continent. *Feminist Africa* (*FA*), the first continental gender studies journal (www.feministafrica.org), was established in 2002. This publication — its layout, editorial practices and peer review processes, and its dual hard-copy and electronic dissemination strategy — demonstrates the commitment to produce and share feminist knowledge attuned to the diverse political

and intellectual agendas of Africa's feminist communities.[3] The production of feminist knowledge was addressed through a series of transnational research initiatives that experimented with the meaning of feminist methodologies.

3 Recognized as an accredited scholarly periodical by the South African Ministry of Education since 2002, FA is in its 14th issue and its 8th year of publication.

creating feminist research spaces

The research initiatives pursued under the strengthening gender studies for Africa's transformation project brought feminist scholars and activists from different countries together to carry out research, often for the first time, on topics generated at the 2002 agenda setting workshop and the ensuing curriculum strengthening meetings. They addressed women's activism (*FA* 4, 2005), higher educational institutional cultures (*FA* 8 and 9, 2007), sexual harassment and abuse in higher educational institutions (Bennett, 2002, 2005), sexual cultures (*FA* 5, 2005), militarism, conflict and peace-building (*FA* 10, 2008) and gender-based violence (*FA* 14 in press). They shared a commitment to defining and developing feminist methodologies (as reflected in all the editorials, and specifically in *FA* 1 (2002) on 'Intellectual Politics', and *FA* 11 'Researching for Life: Paradigms and Power', 2008). All the research projects were collaborative, carried out by self-identified feminist researchers based in the research locales and as change agents in the institutions where possible, such as in the higher education studies. The AGI's role consisted of raising funds and facilitating collaborative process by identifying and bringing the researchers together in intellectually supportive spaces to work on the formulation of questions that would speak to local gender struggles, facilitating the design of project-specific methods compatible with feminist research ethics, and enabling the analysis, writing and publication of the resultant research through short research residencies, editing and publication.

Merely creating feminist intellectual spaces was to prove to be a radical act because, as Jane Bennett succinctly puts it:

> The demands of our work, and the institutional and organizational conventions through which we channel it frequently leave us neither time nor direction in terms of how to *actually think* through the meaning of 'doing research' in our contexts'. (Bennett, 2009: 4–5)

The specific meaning of 'feminist research' was not assumed, but reinvented through collective reflection and discussion in each project, thus responding to complex and shifting realities in which 'feminism' has multiple manifestations. Yet, it became apparent that there was a level of consistency in the overall ethics and epistemological assumptions of what we were doing. This suggests that feminist principles can inform the pursuit of feminist research, working to guide the choice and design of questions, the choice and application of methods, and the interpretation and analysis of findings. Finally, we found that the

meaning of feminist research could be also developed in relation to identifiable feminist agendas manifesting in any given context.

That is not to suggest that feminist research is premised on an uncritical acceptance of women's movements as they are currently constituted, but rather that feminist research approaches can be developed through a politics of critical engagement with activism, using scholarly resources (feminist theoretical tools, modes of analysis, historical experience, etc.) that reach beyond the immediacies of a given local gender relations and struggles to enable reflection and deepen understanding. Feminist researchers thus bring feminist theorizations, concepts and methods to bear on the work of demystifying existing gendered systems of domination, and developing critical understandings and analyses of all aspects of women's lives and gender relations, women's movements and their strategies.

Feminist research practice in various African contexts thus defies simple definition. Perhaps we can do little more than characterize three broad tropes, that echo women's movements' earlier commitment to research 'on women, by women and for women', noting that these are often intertwined.

Research *on* activism includes studies of women's movements and activist strategies, carried out to document experience that has great strategic value to the movements concerned, and may offer much to other movements too, whether they are located in similar contexts or not. Thus, for example, Nina Mba's (1982) book *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1965* has served as a significant resource for feminist activists. Nina Mba was a feminist historian and an active member of the socialist feminist organizations of women in Nigeria through the 1980s and 1990s. The value with which this volume is held in Nigeria where the author lived and conducted her research was underlined when the National Women's Studies Network facilitated the publication of an affordable local edition in 1996. Her second major work documented the life and activism of Mrs Funmilayo Ransome–Kuti, the renowned socialist feminist and was equally well received as an inspirational resource for women activists (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997). Sylvia Tamale's (2000) book *When Hens Begin to Crow: Ugandan Women's Experience of Parliamentary Politics* is also illustrative.

Research *by* activists is research that in and of itself generates/inspires/ stimulates and *is* activist in terms of its process and its products. The manual, produced by the Network of Southern African Tertiary Institutions, *Challenging Sexual Harassment* (Bennett, 2002) and the collection of case studies 'Killing a Virus with Stones?' (Bennett, 2005) both exemplify the feminist commitment to activists carrying out research, as well as resourcing and documenting activism. The first of these is a resource for all those engaged in trying to bring about change in institutions that have not addressed sexual harassment and the

abuse of women. The second is a series of case studies that critically reflect on the results of the anti-sexual harassment policy activism that has been carried out, and questions the efficacy of the policies that have been instituted in response to activism. Another example is the large body of work of the Women and Law in the Southern Africa network that established an educational trust through which member groups have published over a dozen publications locally. These have been carried out by feminist legal activists all over Southern Africa, generating books on various aspects of customary, civil and family law in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho. These all serve as resources for training and strengthening legal activism in the region (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, 2000, 2001a and 2001b). Activist research activity has been accompanied by the pursuit of test cases, lobbying and advocating for law reform, legal service provision, and information and training, including the establishment of a women's centre and postgraduate courses in women and the law, in the Faculty of Law at the University of Zimbabwe.

Research *for* activism is perhaps the most common, as it refers to work loosely designed to inform and support the work of feminist movements, including gender statistics, policy analyses and studies that cast light on the structures and dynamics of the oppression and subordination of women. The research on gender and institutional culture in African universities[4] is illustrative, in the sense that it was designed to support and stimulate activism, even though the studies themselves did not involve activism. The research process unearthed and documented the institutional cultural dynamics sustaining gender inequality and male advantage in universities that claim to be neutral and liberal environments (Mama and Barnes, 2007a, b). The case studies that were carried out at major public universities in Ghana (see Tsikata, 2007), Nigeria (see Odejide, 2007), Zimbabwe (see Gaidzanwa, 2007), Senegal (see Diaw, 2007) sought the cooperation of the Vice Chancellors and used researchers based in each institution, with a view to influencing the policy makers and administrators and developing interventions in each institution. The research was thus primarily gathering knowledge that would then be used to support lobbying and advocacy, and provide the information necessary to design various actions and interventions by way of following up and pursuing change.[5]

Feminist research in Africa has been pursued using a variety of conceptual tools drawn from feminist theory, new methods, as well as methods drawn from other contemporary critical research fields. These have nearly always been improvised and adapted for local usage, often in ways that are not fully conscious, and which often go unreported. Therefore, for example, the use of a 'semi-structured interview' by a skilled feminist researcher gathering information in a community she is familiar with will be nuanced and adapted by her knowledge of the cultural context, its particular modes of orality and locally specific speech codes

4 A collaborative project carried out by the AGI with the support of the Association of African Universities.

5 In fact, the activist objectives were not fully achieved because the funders chose to discontinue support for the project once the initial research phase was completed, so it was left to the AGI to publish summary findings in Feminist Africa, and some of the individual

inflected by gender, ethnicity, class and age, as these are treated in the particular locality. More complex scenarios arise in contexts of insecurity and past or incipient violence, and may require engaging with the perhaps previously hidden experiences of trauma in the lives of both the researcher and the researched.

Conventional understandings of research, and the methods developed to carry out research, presume conditions that are not only largely imaginary, but, at the very least, assume a level of infrastructure and stability that often does not characterize African contexts. Political and economic instability, militarism, resource scarcity and conflicts, situations of extreme poverty and livelihood insecurity, costs and difficulties of communication and transportation, poor infrastructure, conditions of war and violence all affect research in ways that can not be ignored. At the very least they render many research methods irrelevant or impossible to use in any textbook fashion.

It is clear that despite the pressure to remain within positivist conventions, feminist researchers in the region have sought to give voice to women through methods that allow and encourage the articulation of previously unavailable narratives — story telling, oral histories, biographies and life stories reflect growing awareness of the limits of the androcentric archive and the colonial and postcolonial information systems that have silenced women and suppressed their perspectives.

However, activists wanting to contribute to transformation often find their choice of tools influenced by those they seek to engage with. In Africa, most feminists have continued to put great faith in policy makers. Feminists lobbying for a legal or policy change must engage with policy makers who have strong ideas about research, and these are still heavily positivist, as evidenced by the insistence on 'fact and figures' — or quantitative data. Policy makers resist unfamiliar kinds of information, oftentimes dismissing qualitative or experiential material as 'anecdotal' 'invalid' or not 'objective'. This is not just a question of 'packaging' findings because it actually speaks to questions of epistemology, method and strategy. This concerns activist scholars who seek to influence policy, while being critical of — and therefore reluctant to limit research in this way. Moreover, a feminist ethic means that we want our means (research methods and practices) to be compatible with the ends (liberatory and transformative). In other words, feminist researchers often face the dilemma of deciding when to allow research to be instrumentalized by the narrow needs of policy makers, and when and how to pursue more qualitative, possibly transformative, research methodologies.

In contexts where histories of imperialism have denuded the cultural and intellectual fabric, there is a dire need to address complexity, nuance, multiplicity and power relations in our societies, all matters that defy simple

quantitative study. It is partly in response to this situation that feminist research in Africa, like that in many parts of the world, has focused on in-depth qualitative studies. The AGI-initiated projects all focused on developing ways of doing qualitative research that speaks to contexts that have not been previously researched, and where social realities have not been meaningfully theorized from any perspective, least of all feminist perspectives.

However, in the end, it is not so much a question of 'which tools' but rather how we use them. Feminist research in Africa, as much as anywhere else, is defined by the epistemology that frames it, the theory we develop and our commitment to a feminist field ethic, rather than the tools themselves.

feminist ethics in the field

Activist research is premised on a politics of solidarity. An activist research ethic demands that we not only defy the academic canon by *not* maintaining distance, but actually go a great deal further, to actively relate to and engage with our 'research subjects' and explore ways of joining them and supporting their struggles. However, this ethic of solidarity demands a high degree of self-awareness and reflexivity. It requires that we take careful cognizance of our own subjectivity — manifest in our multiple positioning as political, institutional, ethnicized, gendered, sexualized and classed subjects from particular locations. Furthermore, those we research will have their own perceptions of us, as we are 'read' and responded to accordingly, in ways that will never be fully apparent to us. When we are conducting research in our local contexts, we are situated with epistemic advantages, as well as challenges and demands. Soheir Morsy (1989) discusses what it means to return to carry out anthropological research in the Egyptian village where her family comes from, after she has spent many years studying and working overseas. She notes the deep sense of responsibility and the social dilemmas that the methodological convention of disengagement would have placed her in. For activists, active engagement is demanded and poses even more complex challenges. The most central of these lies in the fact that being locally engaged and committed to local struggles demands a much greater degree of involvement. The level of social responsibility and accountability is also greater. Even when researchers travel to communities other than those of their own birth and upbringing, it is still higher than visiting or expatriate researchers will ever face. It also makes possible a real and intimate engagement with the various manifestations of difference, power and privilege that characterize the particular contexts that we are engaging with. These include the divisions of class, education, ethnicity, language, rural–urban location and simply the status of being an outsider, even from within the same country. More significantly, they include ethical dilemmas that face researchers who are identified with local cultures that may contradict feminist commitments. Just two examples suffice to illustrate this point.

Sylvia Tamale, a Ugandan law professor and feminist activist who participated in the research network convened to carry out research on contemporary sexual cultures in selected African contexts, carried out research on *Ssenga*, a centuries-old Buganda institution through which paternal aunts prepare young women for adult sexuality and marriage in accordance with Buganda tradition. Her interest was sparked by the fact that the practice of *Ssenga* has survived and spread. While it still serves as a sexual schooling institution through which sexual norms, mores and practices are imparted to successive generations, it is now carried out as a thoroughly modern business using radio, popular magazines and TV shows and making profits for its providers. As previously, it may work for or against feminist commitments to women's sexual rights and freedoms. In honouring the ethic of placing women, their concerns, perceptions and understandings of reality at the centre of research, her methods were deeply participatory and diverse, as she set out to involve elders, community leaders, participants in *Ssenga*, and *Ssengas* themselves and to address the traditional variant of the institution, as well as its contemporary commercialization and spread beyond the confines of the ethnic group credited with originating it, and the borders of Uganda. Her local identity as a Muganda grants her access that outside researchers would never have, but it simultaneously intensifies the ethical challenges. She notes:

> Ethical issues in a research study of this nature are extremely poignant. While it is important to explore and understand African sexualities, the research must deal with the dilemma … how much to reveal of the community's 'sex secrets'. The fact that I myself am a Muganda did nothing to mitigate this ethical dilemma. In fact, my ethnic background and social position gave me considerable advantage and access as I gathered information, some of it extremely intimate … participants spoke freely and fully. (Tamale, 2007: 13)

She finds that her feminist activist commitments are at odds with the tenets of group loyalty and discretion. As an activist she is not only committed to demystifying the institution overall, but also to challenging conservative versions of *Ssenga* and advocating for more liberatory discourses of sexuality, a process that requires openly discussing and debating the details of the institution. Her identity as a professional academic demands that she publish her research, thus documenting the changing and contested nature of an institution that, like many 'traditions', has moved far from its roots in the ancient Buganda kingdom. Whereas anthropologists provided detailed observation and documentation of the ways in which *Ssenga* was traditionally practiced in an imaginary stable state, Tamale attends to the dynamics of cultural transformation, addressing postcolonial conditions under which *Ssenga* has continued to exist, but has been changed by conditions that have led to its commercialisation and internationalisation.

Yaba Badoe carried out research on a community of women dispossessed and ostracized after being accused of witchcraft in Northern Ghana. They live under the patronage of a local chief on the outskirts of a small town called Gambaga.

The reading of complicated narratives that reveal the shifting subjectivities of women who have been traumatized by their experience poses analytical challenges, as ritual, belief, and divergent notions of truth conflict. Yaba Badoe is an urban and educated Ghanaian of Akan origin:

> Culturally I was very much an outsider, and oblivious to the nuances and niceties of social interaction between Mampele-speaking women in the camp .... (Badoe, 2005: 42)

To address the language problem she worked with a locally based woman translator in Mamprusi, the local lingua franca, in a research field in which Fulani, Hausa, Kokomba and Bimoba were all spoken. Even so, establishing the parameters for narrative interviewing posed challenges too:

> It was immediately apparent that the notion of narrating their life-story was an unusual one for many of the women. Almost all of them asked for further clarification from the interpreter. After a couple of minutes during which I'd ask the interpreter what she'd said, I'd intervene, concerned that the interpreter was beginning to shape the woman's narrative .... I would encourage [her] to tell me whatever she thought was important in her life in any order she wanted. (Badoe, 2005: 41)

Painstakingly elicited, the narratives all framed women's life stories as uneventful until the circumstances that culminated in their arrival in Gambaga, variously depicted as a place of refuge and safety, a place of exile or simply as a camp, where the women designated as witches would remain indefinitely. While some narratives seem to reflect an internalization and acceptance of their status as witches, others shift between degrees of resignation and complete rejection, regarding this as something that has been inflicted on them by greedy or jealous in-laws, relatives or rivals.

The interpretation of deeply emotional narratives of traumatic events that have included physical abuse, dispossession and forced removal to a place of relative safety posed many challenges for Badoe, and much is left unexplained, at best only tentatively theorized. Yet, the report is a uniquely intimate and rich depiction of life stories drawn from a community of women, displaced after being defined as dangerous by their communities and loved ones (Badoe, 2007).[6]

6 This project was later developed into a film designed to be used as an activist resource by women's movements in the region — *The Witches of Gambaga*, 2010, directed by Yaba Badoe, Fadoa Films.

In-group and out-group dynamics are the fabric of all research relationships. In multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multiply constituted postcolonial contexts that Africa typifies in infinite variations, convening a team made up of African feminists researching in their own national contexts is only a first small step to inventing research that redresses the global North–South knowledge system. African feminist research teams are able to take the next step, moving beyond the grand imperial divide to begin to think through and engage with the myriad divisions that prevail within the region.

These examples illustrate the ways in which locally connected feminist researchers may often find themselves working in areas where secrecy and fears of disclosure complicate conventional methods and make it very difficult to honour feminist epistemological considerations that require us to carry out research in a manner that is respectful towards participants whose beliefs and practices may include aspects that may be oppressive to women. Connections to the communities also engender responsibilities that surface questions of reciprocity and social obligation that also vary from one location to another, requiring a degree of sensitivity and tact that may elude the casual investigator.

concluding thoughts

Four decades since the establishment of the first 'women in society' course in 1979 at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, and a decade and a half after the AGI began the continental program to strengthen the feminism in African gender and women's studies, what has been achieved?

Feminist movements have become more assertive and influential in Africa, and there are now significantly more students, scholars, activists and writers engaged in feminist scholarship across the region. The establishment of new gender and women's studies centres, teaching programs and research projects has continued apace, including the first initiatives in French-speaking Africa (Senegal and Burkina Faso). Feminists who have had the experience of working across disciplines and perspectives, within and outside academic institutions and sometimes across national borders, now support one another, and as a result have developed a steadily growing sense of the value of their work, both locally and internationally.

One major achievement of the last decade has been the growth of feminist networking that spans academic and activist communities. Feminists working in Africa now *feel* a new level of community, one that is not merely imagined. It is most strongly felt amongst those who have moved from visioning and imagining what this would mean, into sharing the work of thinking, designing and carrying out projects and building relationships grounded in feminist practice. The active use of web and social networking technologies has meant the additional benefit of creating a virtual space that extends far beyond the meetings and workshop spaces that have been created. However, the creation of the treasured spaces that have allowed dozens of Africa's feminist thinkers to come together at various African locations and carry out collaborative work on intellectual projects is historic.

Defining intellectual agendas that speak to the concerns of women and women's movements, and beginning to carry out independent, locally grounded research and publication has required dedicated resources and capacities, and finding

these will undoubtedly continue to present many challenges, in a world that is becoming increasingly unequal and divided under the rubric of globalization, and in which the very existence of socially engaged and local scholarship has to be defended.

The experience of feminist intellectual networking in Africa underlines the value of autonomous intellectual spaces and projects, as it is these that allow the articulation of research agendas and develop methodologies attuned to local contexts, gender struggles and challenges. It is clear that feminists in Africa need to be both globally informed and locally grounded, and able to work across multiple institutional sites if they are to be effective.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that we rely on organized movements to challenge power and bring about change. Knowledge without power does not get very far. Feminists who can spend time doing intellectual work therefore have a responsibility to resist academic isolation, and stay connected to movements in ways that allow ideas to challenge power.

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biography

Amina Mama, Nigerian feminist researcher and scholar, spent 10 years as chair in Gender Studies establishing the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute as a continental resource dedicated to developing transformative scholarship, before moving to the University of California, Davis in 2010. She is the founding editor of the African journal of gender studies, *Feminist Africa*. Her books include *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*, *Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa* and *Engendering African Social Sciences*. She co-produced the documentary *The Witches of Gambaga*.

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