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# Feminist Africa 9: Rethinking Universities II

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# Editorial: Rethinking Universities II

Teresa Barnes and Amina Mama

Welcome to *Feminist Africa* 9, the second of two issues dedicated to Rethinking Universities, in which we continue the work first begun in FA1 to present and develop feminist perspectives on Africa's institutions of higher learning. The feature articles cover a range of countries, and we are especially pleased to bring work from Francophone Africa to this issue.

As we write this editorial from Cape Town in November 2007, feminist activists and scholars around South Africa are shaking their heads over the news that the ANC Women's League has chosen as their "preferred candidate" for the ANC presidency a man who embodies at best the conservative traditions of southern African patriarchy, and at worst its most cynically misogynist aspects. The ANC Women's League has never been a radical body, but its enthusiasm for this candidate still chills the heart. Given South Africa's electoral system, it is inevitable that the president of the ANC will become the president of South Africa following the next national elections. The supine support of women for masculinist hegemonic domination is not what we thought the mothers, daughters, sons and brothers of South Africa suffered, fought and died for. In this sentiment we join sisters on the continent more experienced with the depths to which the gender politics of newly democratic nations can plummet.

This lamentable political development brings this issue, our issue, *the* issue about knowledge production into sharp and poignant relief. What do we teach the young women and men in our classrooms about their histories and traditions? How do we engage meaningfully with a generation seemingly mesmerised by the chimeric materialism of freedom? How do academics engage with women who live far outside the ivory towers but can have a strong organisational presence? How do feminists survive and mentor each other in the academy long enough to do all these things? Where do they find allies in the struggle to keep critical consciousness alive – and kicking? How long is this piece of string, anyway?

In her book, *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Cultures* (1995), Italian feminist Sylvia Gherardi writes convincingly about the ways that patriarchal knowledge is coded into everyday practices. She argues that organisations change via the destabilisation of dichotomies and hierarchies, and that is the task of feminist activists. This is, of course, an uncomfortable thought when applied to African higher education systems, which as we know have been massively destabilised already by national developments and international economic pressures. In this volume of *Feminist Africa*, however, we move to explorations of efforts that selectively target the parts of our ivory towers where hierarchies and dichotomies are especially obstructive to the development of equitable, feminist knowledges.

The authors in this volume of *Feminist Africa* report mixed results in pursuing such strategies. Aminata Diaw, Lesley Shackleton, Emebet Mulugeta, and Margaret Ngaling and Joyce Endeley present articles on institutional activism at the universities of Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Cape Town (South Africa), Buea (Cameroon) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). At each of these institutions, feminist scholars have sought to transform institutional policies, procedures and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and injustice. Jane Bennett and Vasu Reddy, and Mary Hames, writing about South Africa, address the intellectual activism through which feminists have sought to resist the reproduction of gender divisions and inequalities in the teaching and research functions of universities. FA9 also brings a welcome spotlight onto the often-neglected activism of women students, both in formal political structures and in creative outreach work. Finally, an extensive set of reviews of works on African universities and feminist historiography shows that both are thriving in academic publishing of late.

One of the important threads of commonality in the contributions to FA9 is that university administrations exhibit a range of contradictory and ambivalent responses in resisting feminist activism. Perhaps it is part of the postcolonial condition to reject new ideas from local women as being imported, but this does not explain why there is then a distinct preference for imported projects over local initiatives. Both Shackleton and Diaw allude to this problem in their discussions of initiatives at the universities of Cape Town (UCT) and Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD). At UCT, the HERS-SA initiative for career development and mentoring was tolerated as an externally-funded programme that relied on the labour and energy of one determined individual; but the initiative remained on the margins of the institution and eventually

moved off campus altogether. Thus, UCT (currently celebrating its new status as number 200 on a list of the 200 best universities in the world) has belied its liberal image once again by failing to respond to the opportunity to entrench a successful gender equality programme. With regard to UCAD, Diaw observes that the administration resisted Senegalese faculty efforts to introduce gender and women's studies for many years; but they readily accepted an externally-funded and -led programme to develop women's administrative skills. One effect of this was to reinforce the notion that the gender priority of the institution was women's supposed lack of administrative skills, rather than the lack of support for academic capacity-building.

Similarly, the profile of the Institute for Gender Studies (formerly known as CERTWID) at the extremely male-dominated University of Addis Ababa explores the ambivalence with which university management realises the need to accede to the demand for gender and women's studies, but leaves to dedicated women the burden of responsibility of delivery for such a programme. Resisting oppression by being invited to voluntarily increase one's own exploitation is one of the ironies of feminist intellectual activism.

The record of intellectual activism for curriculum change is also uneven. Our accumulating experience of both the integrationist and mainstreaming strategies is deepening our understanding of what it takes to develop courses that do more than merely 'add on' knowledge to existing paradigms. Feminist teachers have learned a great deal about what it means to design and deliver teaching that challenges pervasive manifestations of gender oppression and inequality. This is teaching, we hope, which develops understandings that reach into personal and political realities so that gender becomes something that we live and do, as well as think. Bennett and Reddy's contribution explores the teaching of sexuality and gender in South African universities, as "...the connection between university classrooms and the environments beyond those classrooms" is realised. They grapple with the distance that exists, and is often unwittingly maintained, between students' complex daily lives and faculty preoccupations. Hames, on the other hand, offers an exposition of how academic feminism can also flower in creative spaces which are more accessible to a range of audiences than classrooms ringing with formal academic discourse. Hames and the student cast of "Reclaiming the P...Word" confront misogyny and gendered powerlessness and turn them around with humour and strength. Women in Cape Town, whatever language they speak, never say *poes*, the "p...word" (vagina, in the Afrikaans language) in public. As we saw in FA6 when

Ugandan women fought in 2005 for public discussion of the play *The Vagina Monologues*, speaking is itself a source of bold social power. Talk about the destabilisation of dichotomies and hierarchies: speaking the pain and finding the happiness that can both be lodged in one's body makes a small space like the converted lecture room in an old building at the fringes of the University of the Western Cape into a fleetingly wonderful liberated zone. Barnes' poem reflects this atmosphere of creativity.

The eagerness with which new students come forward to participate in "Reclaiming the P...Word", and the tough political eye of the UCT SRC president, as interviewed by Awino Okech, are reminders that the initiatives of academic feminism are actually rooted in our intellectual contexts in important ways. Student politics has historically been a seedbed of social and political activism in postcolonial Africa. Students are at their most productive, ironically, when they are at their most challenging: both in terms of critical thinking and physically-expressed activism. When Zukiswa Mqolomba, student leader at UCT, says simply, "I am the president" (rather than "I am a woman president") she configures these debates anew by transcending the "women's league" traditions such as those to which we referred at the beginning of this Editorial. The young student members of the "P...Word" cast are similarly building on older consciousness-raising strategies with a new boldness.

We think that each effort in institutional and intellectual activism, regardless of formal success or failure, has made a contribution to this kind of growth. Activism always leaves important traces, if not always (as we see in this issue) unambiguous success. Even as our institutional spaces flicker in and out of existence; as individuals decide to move on or to retreat to quieter spaces for breathers and rest, there are young women standing on our shoulders. There are young men who have learned to reject the privileges that patriarchy can bring. We salute the energy, keen minds and courage of these young people. The future of the complex ideal of social equality in Africa is in their hands.

# Sewing machines and computers? Seeing gender in institutional and intellectual cultures at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal<sup>1</sup>

Aminata Diaw

## Introduction

The Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar (*l'Université Cheikh Anta Diop* or UCAD) has a trajectory linked to the colonial history of Senegal, the vicissitudes of the construction of the independent nation, the decrees of the Bretton Woods Institutions during the socio-economic crisis of the “lost decades”, and the opportunities and uncertainties of globalisation. Bathily, Diouf and Mobdj (1998) have described these historical periods in Senegal as the assimilationist years (1918–57), the nationalist years (1946–60), the anti-imperialist years (1960–75), and the resurgence of capitalism and corporations, judged to be ongoing to this day.

UCAD is one of the oldest institutions of higher learning in francophone West Africa, and was the University of Dakar until 30 March 1986.

There is an existing literature on the contribution of the Cheikh Anta Diop University to the formation of Senegalese and African intellectuals, the struggle for democracy and liberty, and the respect for academic freedom and university autonomy (principles referred to in French as *les franchises universitaires*). As Sawyerr (2004) explains, the university was an essential part of the post-colonial project to develop the nation, hence its public status. However, it was to become a site of resistance to development policies. The economic crisis of the 1980s seriously eroded the financial resources of UCAD, which came primarily from the state; it destroyed the quality of teaching and research, and negatively affected the living standards of teachers, students and administrative and service personnel, at the same time that liberalisation and globalisation posed new challenges to development and higher education.

The crisis, not restricted to the university but affecting all of society,

shed light on the place and role of women in development, as indicated in studies such as *Senegal 2015* and *Femmes Senegalaises à l'horizon 2015*. The objective of this research has been to better understand the relationship between gender and the institutional and intellectual culture of UCAD. On 20 April 1996, the Senegalese Association of University Graduates held a conference entitled "Discrimination against women in the workforce", during which Professor Souleymane Niang, the former vice-chancellor (recteur) of UCAD, deplored the under-representation of women at faculty and university assemblies. He warned, however, against positive discrimination, describing it as an "Anglo-Saxon" concept. For him, "the university [is] a non-discriminatory space" (UCAD: 1998).

But does this official notion of academic neutrality, as put forth in discourses of science and knowledge, match the institutional reality of the university? During an African regional consultation preceding a global conference on higher education, Professor L. P. Makhubu insisted on the converse. She wrote:

For those women who have been recruited to the staff of universities, there are still numerous hurdles to overcome in order to rise to higher academic and administrative echelons. Some of these are occasioned by social and cultural demands on their time, making it extremely difficult for them to devote the kind of time required for excellence in research and scholarship. For many it becomes a choice between family and career. This, in the main, explains the inability of women to satisfy the promotions criteria of universities, many of which are based on strong research (Makhubu: 1998).

Such questions will be explored here: that is, how are men and women affected by the institutional and intellectual culture of UCAD, and how do they, in turn, shape it?

### **Conceptual framework of this study**

Institutions, Gilles Ferreol asserts, are "marked by the seal of temporality and respond to the imperatives of socialisation, control and regulation. Institutions are manifest... as rules of action and aim to establish discipline [in life], based on stable and reciprocal anticipations" (1995, 70). The university, like all institutions, is a site of cultural production, reproduction and transformation and, as such, is profoundly marked by gender.

The institutional and intellectual cultures of UCAD have not shattered inequitable gender relations or smashed policies and practices that exclude

women, despite the fact that the university has always championed democracy. As in Senegalese society, masculine and feminine identities in the university institution are circumscribed and non-egalitarian, again despite the prevailing global discourses on gender equity and democracy. But due to the interaction between local and global sites, these gendered identities are increasingly being negotiated and contested, with impact upon the institutional and intellectual cultures of the university. The question is, how does knowledge transform into power, and institute a logic of exclusion which informs the very production of knowledge? In other words, what is the connection between the institutional and intellectual cultures of the university, and what is the place and impact of gender within them?

In the larger study that I conducted for the Gender and Institutional Culture project of the African Gender Institute<sup>2</sup> my main research questions were:

- What is the nature of the institutional culture of UCAD?
- What is the link between the institutional and intellectual cultures at UCAD? What is the nature of academic neutrality? How is the intellectual activity of women constructed?

This article will explore the second set of questions by examining two initiatives at UCAD: the initiative of women's leadership for development and democracy, and the programme for teaching, research and documentation of women's studies and the analysis of gender relations in the social sciences in Africa.

## Methodology

It was imperative to develop a methodological approach for my research that incorporated archival research, interviews and observation. The objective of such a multi-faceted approach was to bring the marginal to the centre of analysis. Thus, if knowledge gives access to decision-making positions in the university (as vice-chancellor, dean, or director of college or institute), and if in addition it is produced not by insubstantial individuals but by men and women with socially and culturally constructed identities, doesn't academic neutrality become a façade for the inequality that determines gender relations?

The archival component of the research initially focused on two types of documents. The first were official documents concerning the university crisis, with a focus on the relationship between state power and the university, and between the state and the students. Secondly, documentation produced by trade unions, the university administration and the students was also used to trace the history of the institution. I also read policy documents on higher

education and UCAD (e.g. seminars, reports from the vice-chancellor, minutes from faculty meetings [specifically the Faculty of Science and Technology and the Faculty of Humanities], trade union and student documents).

These documents revealed the invisibility of women at the heart of UCAD. This compelled me to also conduct interviews, so as to find traces of women at the university. The interviews especially made it possible to discuss with women their personal experience as women, to know whether being a woman has been an impediment to their academic career path and especially, at a more fundamental level, how this aspect has been mainstreamed in the knowledge they produced themselves to change the intellectual and institutional cultures of their university. In this part of the research, I prioritised conducting interviews with women who had been at the university for a relatively long time, and those who occupied strategic positions in the university hierarchy and union movements. I interviewed:

- the woman responsible for the leadership initiative (*l'initiative leadership*), who is also one of the women in charge of the Association of Senegalese Women University Graduates (*l'Association Sénégalaise des Femmes diplômées de l'Université*);<sup>3</sup>
- the author of the programme entitled “The teaching, research and documentation of women’s studies and the analysis of gender relations in the social sciences in Africa”;
- three women trade unionists;
- three administrative directors of the university (two of whom are women), in charge of university housing, juridical affairs, teaching and reform;
- the dean of the Faculty of Sciences and the registrar of the Faculty of Arts, who provided the minutes of their faculty assemblies; and
- a director of a school and a faculty institute.

I then interviewed students on the basis of a predetermined profile, including:

- members of student societies;
- members of the “leadership initiative” programme; and
- members of religious associations.

In addition, I interviewed two other students: a former member of the Student Society of the Faculty of Arts and a member of the General Union of Students of Dakar (*l'Union Générale des Étudiants de Dakar*, UGED). Following the state-university crisis of February 2006, I continued my investigation with a

discussion with two students who were living on campus, in the areas which were most affected by the intervention of law enforcement agents. A female master's student who was finishing her course in the Faculty of Humanities assisted me in my research. Other students helped to transcribe interviews and carry out archival research.

Ethical and socio-cultural considerations were an important dimension of this research process. Interviewees, both teachers and students, were very sensitive over what would become of our discussions. For example, they were concerned about the things they said referring to their colleagues, and about their personal privacy, while also being conscious of institutional considerations. One of the interviewees, speaking of her own career and domestic constraints, explicitly stated the limits of what she was willing to share, saying: "I will not say that because of the microphone. If we had been alone, I would have told you, I lived this history." This censoring and self-censoring by the interviewee demonstrates that socio-cultural considerations interfere with the research process and can thus constitute a limiting factor. As long as there is a relationship of identification of roles, status, and thus of equality, establishing confidence between researcher and interviewee, there can be freedom of expression within the interview. The relationship between researcher and interviewee is often linked to that which can exist between different age classes, which is a common feature of West African societies. The researcher thus has to be conscious of the ways in which the research dynamic can be disturbed: for instance, the presence of my young research assistant was not always appropriate during interviews, especially when private subjects were tackled, or when examples implicating other faculty members were given. A colleague confirmed this tension: "I first started [working here] in 1971 – I won't say my age, because that does not concern young students." I therefore re-adjusted my approach for interviews with female colleagues to stress our proximity and intimacy, leaving out my research assistant.

My relationship with my assistant was instructive in another way: having participated in a number of interviews and worked on transcription, she was able to identify with some of the themes that arose, as she herself is a female student and teacher at the university. I explained the sense and objective of the research to her but deliberately chose not to interview her at the beginning or during the research, in order to see how she would respond to the research material, and what issues she would choose to raise with me, perhaps in confidence. As she came to understand the objectives of the research, she became more involved. For example, she chose to broach a subject which was often avoided by students,

namely that of sexuality. She told me of the so-called “right” of teachers to have sexual access to students (*le droit de cuissage*), and of sexual harassment. One of her teachers had wanted to start an unwelcome relationship with her, perhaps playing on her naivety. She also shared the difficulty she faced in speaking to other students about this issue, and confirmed that her case was not unique, suggesting the reality of such practices at UCAD.

Her experience foregrounds the question of how such issues can be brought to the surface, especially in a society in which virginity is still upheld as a cardinal virtue for girls, and in which they are still subject to a great deal of social control. Claudel Hall, the campus residence hall for female students, has a negative image linked to the fancy cars one sees parked outside it at certain hours of the day. This reveals, in my opinion, that where female students live automatically becomes a site for complex social debate and contestation about issues of social and behavioural control. Many female students spoke of their parents’ opposition to them living in Claudel Hall, and explained that their parents were resigned to it because of the difficulty of finding alternative lodging in Dakar. My research assistant’s experience suggests that the university has not escaped the patriarchal values that dominate society. Values concerning modesty and dignity, described as *kersa* and *soutoura* in the Wolof language, preclude the public discussion of subjects such as sexuality and sexual harassment. At the heart of the university are men and women who uphold such values, which in turn structure their imaginations and generate the institutional and intellectual cultures of the university.

### **Women’s intellectual agency**

My research suggests the need for gender to be taken into account at both the individual and institutional levels so that equity and equality between the sexes are placed at the heart of the university’s vision and policy. I will not discuss the question of taking up of gender issues at the individual level here, in part because this can be facilitated by institutional change. At present, the university finds itself embroiled in a certain dynamic created by its interactions with its own local society as well as with global forces. Academic neutrality is belied by the under-representation of women in decision-making structures in the university, as well as among students, showing that ultimately the university remains a place for men.

Although this institution resists local and global discourses on gender,<sup>4</sup>

there have been advances in democratisation and the incorporation of gender issues. Two such experiences will be considered here:

- an initiative on female leadership for development and democracy; and
- a project entitled “The teaching, research and documentation of women’s studies and the analysis of gender relations in the social sciences in Africa.”

These two initiatives reveal the limitations and paradoxes of efforts to take gender seriously within the institutional and intellectual cultures of the university.

### *1. Leadership Initiative of Women for Development and Democracy*

UCAD is a masculine space<sup>5</sup> in terms of its deliberative and representational structures, its decision-making procedures, and also the culture of its members. In addition, democracy and academic “neutrality” do not in fact reinforce equality, but rather consolidate the exclusion of women (Diaw: 2006). It was in this context that the project, the Leadership Initiative of Women for Development and Democracy (hereafter referred to as the leadership project) was conceived. This initiative was the fruit of cooperation between UCAD and the University of Kansas, and has three components:

- Leadership development based on the Virginia Tech model, which aims to enhance the leadership skills of women.
- Professional development, which stresses women’s access to technology, internet research methods, subsidies to participate in conferences, and the setting up of computer laboratories for women academics and students.<sup>6</sup>
- Sensitisation on gender issues, targeting the university community. To this end, a University Committee on Equity was set up. Among its other duties, the committee meets the vice-chancellor and his staff every term to discuss gender issues.

This sensitisation project includes addressing the need to highlight the work of women academics, and organising a banquet to honour the woman of the year. The project is undoubtedly opportune, all the more so as it is the first of its kind on gender.

Yet it is important to consider if the leadership project has taken the most appropriate steps to ensure its establishment and durability at UCAD. The Faculty of Humanities at UCAD is an integral part of the project, together with the Faculty of Science and Technology, so as to be on par with the

structure used at the American institution. However, that Humanities did not effectively participate in the project is linked to the non-indigenous nature of the initiative.<sup>7</sup> Many humanities colleagues working on gender and seeking to connect the academy with gender activism were not involved in the project.

In fact, the reception of the leadership project was linked to prior factors that prevented actors at UCAD from truly initiating it. For instance, the official statement of the leadership project speaks of the need for it at UCAD, but does not state how these needs were identified and by whom they were formulated. This tension is clear in the unequivocal judgement of a female colleague, speaking about the project:

It is the equivalent of the famous development projects that were designed in favour of women [...] They call it leadership, they provide the instruments, naturally, since they speak of machines, sewing machines [in the past] and now of computers. It is simply a transposition but what is the qualitative change? Because when we speak about relationships between men and women, of gender, and of feminism, we make a transformation in the environment in which we live [...] they do not build on the existing potential that we have.

The main problem identified concerns the unequal relations between Northern and Southern universities. The institutional logic of incorporating gender at UCAD is inscribed in this macro-economy, but in such a way that it leaves little room for initiative in southern universities because funding comes from the North. One of the female students from the Faculty of Sciences who participated in the leadership project described the situation with precision:

If I had to change something in the project, it would be to review the hierarchy, because we are not very autonomous, often we are trapped by the hierarchy... often we cannot take important decisions immediately, we have to wait for the opinion of (the Senegalese co-director); she also has to consult M. (the American co-director). The course is to give us a certain degree of responsibility to take decisions which are important for us to progress [but] we are forced to bend to their opinion, to their decisions because they provided the material that we could have obtained here.

Over and above such comments on the inequalities built into the project, the institutional approach of the leadership initiative is technocratic. It seems to take on gender in a way that cannot transform the institutional reality or culture of UCAD. It is not linked to research, to curricular design, or to the management and decision-making structures that exclude women at the

university. The institutional approach of the project is limited because it does not define any real transformative strategy.

Some female students in the project unwittingly confirmed these limitations. In response to the question of why they had become involved in the leadership project, they replied that they were leaders or called to become leaders, and thus they were taking the project as a means to being able to assume their future responsibilities. This individualistic and careerist perspective does not seek to deconstruct “the complex dynamics of injustice and postcolonial inequality” (Mama, 2003); it consists rather of “climbing the ladder” in a world dominated by markets and competition. This is undoubtedly a manifestation of the impact of liberalism.

It is important at this stage to emphasize the disconnect which exists in this regard between the university and its society: the discourse of women in political parties and civil society criticises the patriarchal nature of society, deconstructs patriarchal power relations in both the private and public spheres, and advocates women’s access to decision-making fora and political parity between men and women (*la parité*). The autonomy which marks the status of the university and its academic neutrality function, by contrast, to strengthen and consolidate conservatism; they render the institution impermeable to the debates surrounding gender relations in society.

Here it is also important to emphasize the limits of the institutional incorporation of gender at UCAD by considering in what ways this actually affects relationships between men and women. Because it was administered from the top, the leadership project has been very limited in its impact. Despite its achievements – organising two end-of-year banquets and designating a woman academic of the year, creating computer labs at the women’s hall of residence, providing scholarships for women, teaching and sensitising young women to gender and leadership issues – it cannot be said that the project is equal to its task. It suffers from a top-down administration that limits its appeal among the members of its target group.

## *2. The teaching, research and documentation of women’s studies and the analysis of gender relations in the social sciences in Africa*

There is a need to discuss the paradoxes of the institutional incorporation of gender at UCAD. If the institution has been receptive to the leadership initiative discussed above, which was the fruit of Senegalese-American cooperation, it has

been less open to a project which was first proposed by Professor Fatou Sow of UCAD in October 2000. This project is entitled “The teaching, research and documentation of women’s studies and the analysis of gender relations in the social sciences in Africa.” Its development was motivated by two experiences:

- The difficulty experienced by Sow in giving a class on gender. She said: “As soon as I announced the class at UCAD on Women in African Culture, my colleagues accepted it graciously, even though they had difficulty placing it in the curriculum. When the title changed to Women and Gender Relations, they were perplexed. As for the concept of anthropology of the sexes, it shocked their sensibilities, even though I explained that it was to be a reflection on social relations between the sexes, not on copulation” (Imam *et al*, 2004: 47). The hostility of the institution towards the concept of gender can be linked to its institutional and intellectual cultures. This experience shows how the institutional culture can actually be anti-intellectual, upholding the notion that knowledge and the mode of production of knowledge are not gendered.
- This can be contrasted with the involvement of Sow in research and activist networks in Senegal and elsewhere, in the new epistemological and theoretical field of gender, as described in the book which she edited with Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama at Codesria (Imam *et al*, 2004). These experiences led her to realise the extent to which the need for research on women was being ignored at African universities in general and at UCAD in particular. At a time when African social sciences were being revisited because of the crisis of development, and as gender was being proposed as a new paradigm, it was necessary for these new, gender-sensitive approaches, debates and research to be diffused and discussed. This required a defined teaching programme. The delay in recognising this at UCAD can be considered relative to the intellectual challenge theorised by Jane Bennett (2002); this challenge constituted a central platform of militant activism in the 1980s for the creation of independent research and advocacy networks (cf. AFARD), stressing the absence of gender in teaching and research. Compounding the problem were the various crises facing the university at this time: a socio-economic crisis following structural adjustment threatening its very survival; and the rise of religious fundamentalism. These factors did not help preoccupations with gender matters on campus. Paradoxically, the increasingly important impact of gender in the Senegalese public sphere and the role that certain university

activists played in this development did not combine to challenge the intellectual and institutional cultures at UCAD.

It is as part of this context that the project on women's studies must be considered. The project had eight specific objectives, meant to contribute to "enlarging intellectual space and promoting academic liberty, as well as the social responsibility of academics" (Imam and Mama, 1994: 97):

1. Promote reflection on and teaching of gender.
2. Discuss and promote research methodologies on gender in the social sciences.
3. Encourage and seek rigorous academic work considering the realities and the debates on women and gender relations in Africa.
4. Have appropriate documentation on women at the disposal of researchers, students and the public at large (e.g. women's associations, NGOs, etc.).
5. Organise a space for debates and training on women and gender relations, using existing paradigms and creating new ones through local, national and international seminars.
6. Consolidate the teachings and research by the creation of research groups and reflection on these questions.
7. Promote inter-university cooperation.
8. Open the university space to other national structures such as specialised administrative services, local societies, NGOs, international organisations.

The project statement demonstrates that the timid initiatives that already existed – such as the Sociology Department's courses, including "Sociology of the Family and Social Relations of the Sexes" or the Philosophy Department's course in "Gender and Philosophy" – had nothing in common with the number of academics and researchers who are seriously working with gender. Many of these are activists in social movements.

The lack of continuity between teaching and research and activism shows that on this issue, UCAD and Senegalese society are out of sync. The resistance to the women's studies project, most notably from the university-wide Faculty Assembly, which disapproved of it, can be attributed to male domination in the supposedly gender-blind space of the university and to the innate conservatism of the institution.<sup>8</sup> Mkandawire's words at the closing of the seminar, "Engendering Social Sciences", suggest how much territory must be breached, epistemologically, to create the intellectual revolution that will allow for the adoption of gender. As he says, "I am now convinced there is a

corpus of methodologies, approaches and empirical studies based on gender analysis awaiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community” (Imam *et al*, 2004). The necessary epistemological rupture is linked to the social responsibility of intellectuals, and asks fundamental questions: who produces knowledge, for whom and for what purpose?

Through these questions it is possible to see the ideological bias of knowledge that can be conservative by refusing to go “beyond the masks”,<sup>9</sup> and to see the unequal power relations between men and women in a given community such as the university. It is also possible to see alternatives that can be revolutionary in seeking to change these power relations, by considering them in a critical manner. How can such conservative knowledge claim to be scientific when it silences a part of our social reality, ignoring one of the most important social dynamics? This state of affairs violates the principle of equality between men and women and thereby produces injustice.

The decision of the Faculty Assembly clearly shows the ideological position that sustains the institutional and intellectual cultures of UCAD as it continues to subscribe to supposed academic neutrality. This is what I called “The Laziness of the Academy” in a contribution to a feminist colloquium in Dakar (UCAD, 1999). It is indisputably linked to that which Collin, Pisier and Varikas called the:

French singularity which is explained perhaps by the effects of an ideological conception of universalism which covers and hides a double particularism: on the one hand, the particularism of a national tradition [i.e. French] which has been historically identified with the universal and, on the other hand, the particularism of a discipline which has long masked the sex of the knowing-subject (Collin *et al*, 2000: 9).

From my own experience and my own discipline, philosophy, I argue that an approach that takes gender into account can alter the meaning of a philosophical text. One of the main lessons learned is that the invisibility of the woman in philosophy is an ideological construct, which we as academics continue to perpetuate by reproducing exactly what we have learned and, more than anything else, the way in which we learned it. A colleague in the Philosophy Department confided how the same feminist colloquium opened new perspectives to her, allowing her to initiate a course entitled “Gender and Philosophy” in 1999-2000. This suggests the pertinence of Charmaine Pereira’s interrogation, in asking, “How do we produce knowledge about social realities, past or present, which will further our quest for African societies free of all forms of violence and social injustice, and where gendered relations as

well as institutions are transformed? This project is as much political as it is intellectual” (FA1, 2004: 12).

Penda Mbow has also highlighted these intellectual and political dimensions (Sall, 2000) in pointing out the slow progress of Senegalese women academics that do not have newspapers, magazines, or seminars on subjects that are of concern to them. Mbow also stresses the necessity for them to establish links with institutions such as trade unions, women’s movements and associations. We may share Mbow’s appeal when she affirms “that it is urgent to change social relations in university institutions, research centres, research and publications, as well as in civil society.” But it is more difficult to agree with her when she asserts that women do not always perceive the importance of these issues, which causes them to have very little consideration for feminist research. It must be stressed that, on the one hand, women make up the structural minority in the university institution and, on the other, their fragmentation has not yet allowed them to organise and mobilise regarding the issues that preoccupy them. They presently handle such issues individually and outside the institution.

## Conclusion

More research is required, but my work so far has shown the nature of the relationship between gender and the institutional and intellectual cultures of the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar. The academy is not an abstract carrier of a totally neutral knowledge, but houses men and women marked by cultures and specific memories which lead them to define their identity, to create relationships, to break or consolidate prejudices, and to transact so as to acquire power or exclude others. These factors give a particular shape or configuration to the institutional and intellectual culture at UCAD and show that social instability in Senegal has reinforced the masculinisation of the institution. This masculinisation is particularly apparent in the decision-making and representational structures in the university (Diaw, 2006).

These restrictive conditions have an important impact on the production and reproduction of knowledge: under these conditions, who produces knowledge, why and for whom? The intellectual and political dimensions of gender proposed by Charmaine Pereira call into question the scientific nature of the knowledge that we produce, and especially the ideological character of such knowledge, as this knowledge renders certain actors and social dynamics invisible. Can we really speak of science when we perpetuate limited knowledge by failing to break with dominant paradigms marked by a certain ideology? In

response, it is sufficient to restate that the institutional and intellectual cultures of UCAD shape the trajectory of its actors and vice versa.

A last point to consider is that of the relationship between gender and democracy and between political culture and economic context: the reflections in this work have shown that democracy can also be non-inclusive in practice. If the gender relations of women using computers remain the same as when they were confined to using sewing machines, what has changed? If the university is a microcosm, it should not just be a reflection of the weaknesses of a society, but rather a model for improvements. It is a matter of perspective to inscribe gender in a progressive manner at the heart of the institutional and intellectual culture of UCAD, in reworking the curricula, and to proceed, from the political perspective, with an institutional incorporation of gender that in its conception involves both actors and beneficiaries of the university. Things are changing, albeit slowly, with the new reform in curricular structure (Licence-Master-Doctorate) that gives space to women in their faculties and departments to take their interests into account. The challenge UCAD is facing now is to develop reforms that bring about more profound transformations in gender relations.

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## Endnotes

- 1 This article was translated from the French by Simidele Dosekun.
- 2 Please see description of this project in the Editorial of *Feminist Africa 8*.
- 3 Note that this is not an association of women academics, but rather of women with university degrees.
- 4 UCAD is not very responsive to gender issues because of its francophone heritage. As with many African francophone universities of the sub-region, there is no women's studies or gender studies department.
- 5 The research carried out for this study on representative student organisations and the relations existing between men and women within the latter, on the one hand, and on decision-making bodies of the university on the other, leaves no room for a statement other than from a male-dominated space.
- 6 This project set up two Internet laboratories in the girls' residence.
- 7 Academics did not participate much.
- 8 Since 2006-7, the university has had two unconnected gender programmes, one in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences (*Laboratoire Femmes, Société et Culture*) and another in the Research Institute IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop (*Laboratoire Genre*). The programme of the Faculty of Letters will commence in January 2008. Awa Thiam proposed in 1987 - in vain - the creation of a department of anthropology of the sexes.
- 9 I am borrowing this expression from the title of Amina Mama's 1995 book.



# Lost in liberalism: A case study of the disappearance of the gender agenda at a South African university

Lesley Shackleton

## Introduction

The concept of institutional culture is complex and difficult to define. As Gherardi (1995) points out, the culture of an organisation is not something that is overtly noticed by its people, as it is just part of what is natural and normal. Institutional culture is the norm of experience lived by people in and working with the organisation, and while each person's experience is individual, the assumption is that there are common threads and themes that run through these experiences, enabling a broad description of aspects of the organisation's culture. Without individuals being overtly aware of it, institutional culture guides behaviour and beliefs and thus influences every aspect of the institution's functioning. Because of its elusive pervasiveness institutional culture is difficult to map. In this paper I describe a feminist study that uses an analysis of responses to a gender-based change initiative to provide insight into a university's gendered institutional culture.

My case study focuses on an initiative to increase the number of women in leadership positions in higher education in South Africa. Analysis of the responses of purposively selected people within the institution in which the initiative started reveals much about the culture of the institution, and provides insights into how deep-seated gendered attitudes can persist in maintaining the androcentric *status quo* even in a liberal higher education environment.

## Gender in academia

Numerous studies across the world have highlighted gender inequities in academia (e.g. the work of Bagilhole, Blackmore, Heward, Kwesiga, Mama, Morley, Thiele, and others). Among the most visible consequences of these inequities is a vertical gender stratification, with women becoming increasingly

scarce in increasingly senior positions. Mama (2002: 1-8; 2003: 101-125) describes the under-representation of women as intellectual leaders in African universities, with women comprising fewer than 6% of the professors. Singh (2002: 41) states: "Generally, women's status in African universities left much room for improvement."

Despite a progressive national policy environment, recently analysed data from South African universities shows a similar pattern (Sarah Riordan, personal communication, 2007) with only three of the 23 vice-chancellors in the country being women, and women filling fewer than 30% of the senior positions (deans, executive directors and deputy vice-chancellors). Many reasons have been suggested for the 'glass ceiling' that women encounter which prevents them from achieving their promotional aspirations (Bagilhole, 1993; Barres, 2006; Blackmore and Sachs, 2000 and 2001; Currie *et al*, 2000; Dines, 1993; Harris and Thiele, 1998; Heward, 1996; Kettle, 1996; Lawler, 1999; Smulders, 1998; Wenneras and Wold, 2001) and it has been noted by Lawler (1999: 1272-9), Hearn (2001) and others that the more 'prestigious' the institution, the fewer women there are likely to be in senior positions. A number of initiatives have been established in different countries to break this gendered stratification.

In 1999 I was privileged to be working in one of South Africa's more prestigious liberal universities when an American donor organisation offered to provide assistance to improve the institution's gender representation at senior levels. Beyond a verbal welcome of this offer, the university leadership took no follow-up action. Although unrelated to my professional position, my interest in gender equity led me to seize this opportunity and, with the benign tolerance characteristic of the liberal<sup>1</sup> university environment, I was allowed to informally develop programmes that would provide professional development opportunities for women within the university. Over the years, these programmes spread to include women in other higher education institutions, and eventually what became known as HERS-SA<sup>2</sup> moved off campus and was formalised into an independent, non-profit organisation aimed at improving the status of women in higher education in South Africa (Shackleton, 2006b).

As this research uses the interactions around the development of HERS-SA within the case study university as a means to gain insight into its gendered institutional culture, I shall briefly introduce the university, and outline HERS-SA's philosophy and approach.

### *The university*

The case study institution is among the older, historically white universities in South Africa that were established along the lines of liberal western universities to provide education for the young men in the colony (Phillips, 2003: 122-7). In 1948, when the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa and started eroding institutions' rights to admit or employ whoever they chose, the case institution, along with other mainly English-speaking universities, slowly became involved in a campaign of civil disobedience centred around the government's legislated racial separation of staff and students. This opposition to apartheid served to position white English-speaking universities within the higher education structure in the country. They were tolerated outsiders within the country, who, through maintaining international connections, saw themselves as part of the global community of scholars. While there was pride in challenging the policies of the apartheid government of the day, which gave the English-speaking universities a self-image of being liberal institutions fighting for the rights of the masses, there were also outspoken criticisms from those 'masses' who saw universities as benefiting from apartheid policies and being complicit in maintaining the white supremacist status quo. In more recent years the case university, like other South African universities, has been adapting to the new democracy, to the pressures brought about by significant restructuring of the higher education landscape, and to increased government demands for equity (including gender equity) and accountability.

The case institution is arguably one of the most diverse campuses in South Africa, having students from all over South Africa, from many different countries around the world, and from a variety of cultures and religious persuasions. At present around half of all students are black, and half are women. Some 2400 permanent staff work at the university, 32% of whom are academic staff. Just over half the total staff (but only 22% of the academics) are black, and women comprise some 53% of the total staff and 34% of the academic staff. Only one of the six most senior leadership positions (vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellors and registrar) is occupied by a woman, but recent significant progress is evident among other senior ranks, with 50% of the deans and 43% of the executive directors now being women. The institution has gender equity and transformation policies and goals, and, like all other universities in South Africa, is required by government to submit an employment equity report annually to the National Department of Labour.

### *The feminist initiative*

Like other similar programmes,<sup>3</sup> HERS-SA is centred in the belief that there is value in creating a women's-only space in which to explore professional issues in the context of the gendered power structures in higher education (Shackleton, 2006b). While leadership and hierarchical position are not necessarily synonymous, the stated focus of these developmental programmes has been to get more women into senior leadership positions. The rationale for this approach recognises the need to have visible gendered change within the patriarchal core of the institutions, and it recognises the importance of role models. Not only does the role model catch attention, she provides an example for others to follow, and in so doing there is reinforcement of the role being modelled.

The HERS-SA approach includes several of the main approaches to achieving gender equity identified by Ely and Meyerson (2000: 103-51). There is clearly a belief that there is value in 'fixing the woman' to overcome gender-specific socially-imposed limitations, and in providing training to better equip women to take senior positions. Beyond this HERS-SA's professional development philosophy shows a strong radical feminist understanding of the higher education environment, believing that professional development of women requires safe spaces; that is, spaces away from male-dominated power interactions. There is recognition that women often do not realise the power of networking and the role it plays in maintaining the patriarchal environment. The total programme is aimed at increasing personal and professional confidence to enable women to challenge the gendered climate in their institutions and to break through glass ceilings they might have encountered which prevent them from entering the most senior ranks of academia.

### **A feminist qualitative approach**

The research outlined here forms one part of a larger study on gender-based change and institutional culture (Shackleton, 2007). This paper focuses on what the interactions around a case study of a feminist change initiative reveal about the institutional culture. Yin (1994) outlines how a single case study is useful in a situation where previously difficult-to-capture phenomena are to be observed and described, and can provide revelatory information. I take a feminist qualitative approach that integrates a number of sources of data, and allows me to include my personal experience both as researcher and as the instigator of the initiative. In this I have a clear political motive

to raise the profile of gender, and more specifically women, in the discourse around transformation. A feminist approach allows me to locate myself in the research process. The topic of my research arises from my many years of experience in higher education and my growing awareness of the role of gender in this supposedly neutral environment. To quote Harding (1987: 9), "...the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research." She claims that bringing in this subjective element increases objectivity by exposing the standpoint of the researcher as information relevant to the research. Taylor (2001), Hartley (1994), Harding (1987) and others point out that the feminist qualitative approach recognises the impossibility of separating the researcher from the research. The influence of the researcher on the selection of the research topic and on the data collection and analysis cannot and should not be ignored. In my research, rather than ignoring this influence, I consciously build on and integrate my knowledge of the case institution into the study. Beyond this I also recognize that not only am I integrating my influence as a researcher into the research, but that as an insider, I am able to provide personal cultural and institutional insight.

Accordingly, as the researcher, it is important for me to highlight my familiarity with the universe being studied. I am a white woman whose 40 years of experience in higher education has led me to believe that women are more significant players in the higher education environment than their official representation would suggest. My epistemological approach recognises that women's voices and issues can be suppressed by the hegemonic patriarchy in the higher education environment but that it is possible to bring these into the debate through the process of feminist research (Luke, 1994; Morley and Walsh, 1996; Petersen and Gravett, 2000; and others). I bring to this research a particular positionality. As a white person in an historically white institution, I have been an 'insider'. As a white woman (not a man) in an historically white university in the 'new' South Africa, I am now also an 'outsider' and a part of the 'designated groups' identified by the state for equity intervention. Being a woman manager in a male-dominated academic environment also makes me an 'outsider'.

In addition to drawing on my personal experiences in establishing HERS-SA, the main sources of data described here are from semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposively-selected participants in the university. Although most of those interviewed had participated in one or other of the HERS-SA

programmes, some were selected because of their positions in the university, positions from which they might reasonably be expected to be aware of leadership development initiatives for women in the institution. The perspectives of the eight participants range from those involved at the start of the initiative that would develop into HERS-SA to individuals who only encountered HERS-SA some five years later when they attended one of the programmes.

Participants include those whose career within the university has been as an academic, and those who (although they have academic qualifications and in some cases are still studying) have a career in the administration. Four of the participants interviewed have professional responsibility in the human resources or employment equity areas. Three of the participants, one of whom is a woman, hold executive leadership positions. Three of the participants are black women.

An interview schedule formed the basis of a semi-structured interview, within which I explored each participant's positioning within the university with respect to the development of women and their relation to HERS-SA. Questions about the latter covered what they knew about the establishment of HERS-SA, its integration into the institution, and its impact on the institution. In responding to questions about HERS-SA, even participants who knew very little about it revealed gendered attitudes that provided valuable data on the institutional culture.

With the permission of the participants, all the interviews were taped, and, after transcription, all were analysed in the same way with the assistance of Nvivo coding. Gender and power interactions were revealed by exploring the location of the individual within the institution and with respect to HERS-SA, his or her perspective of the gendered climate in the university, his or her views on HERS-SA, and the ways in which participants illuminated the meanings of gender and institutional change through interaction with HERS-SA. Insights were gained around how each individual perceives the university to be relating to HERS-SA, and what opportunities the university, as an institution committed to equity, is accepting from HERS-SA.

## Insights

Insights into the gendered culture of the institution were gleaned from two main sources of data: personal experiences as a long-time member of staff of the university and the initiator of HERS-SA, and interview data. These are discussed below.

### *Personal reflection on the development of HERS-SA*

During the apartheid years, the case institution had undertaken a number of initiatives to counter racial discrimination, many of these being funded by overseas donor organisations. Post apartheid, donor funding has continued to support several institutional transformation initiatives, and within this context it is interesting to note that the impetus for developing women in leadership came from an American donor agency, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which had in the past contributed towards a similar programme in the USA, the HERS Mid-America programme. Following a site visit to the university by representatives from Mellon and HERS Mid-America, an extract from their report stated:

The situation for women is particularly difficult. There are only seven women in senior management... and 96 women in middle management... out of a total of 256 administrators in these grades. Everyone we talked with agreed that it was important to take special steps to help women move into higher levels of administration. Our efforts to identify the major reasons for the current situation and the barriers to women's advancement yielded surprisingly diverse views. In general the male (and some female) section heads and higher administrators suggested that women had low self-esteem, that they sought "comfort zones" and preferred not to make tough decisions... and that many women, especially those in academic faculties, had no interest in administrative work. Women... had a very different take on the situation. They expressed the view that men often assigned them tasks... and then failed to recognise their contributions or permit them to participate in meetings relevant to their work. Many of the women we spoke with... were quite frustrated by the limited roles they were permitted to play (Emerson, 1999).

As mentioned above, in the absence of any formal university response to the Mellon offer, I took the initiative to ask the Mellon Foundation for funds with which I developed what became known as HERS-SA. Until late 2001 a part-time HERS office funded by the Mellon project and comprising one part-time administrator working under my guidance was based in my department at the university. Although not part of my formal responsibilities, these activities were undertaken with the tacit approval of my line manager and I ensured that I included reports on my HERS activities in my regular meetings with him. The donor funding was channelled through and administered by the university, but the institution took little, if any, interest in my involvement

in these HERS activities. No-one objected to my spending time on my 'women's programmes' or questioned what I was doing. Despite this, from this early stage I felt that it was important from a lobbying perspective to let the executive leadership of the university know that there was an initiative for women members of staff, and I ensured that invitations to nominate women for both local seminars and the overseas professional development opportunities went to the vice-chancellor.

The symbiotic relationship that developed between HERS-SA and the university is worth commenting on here. Theoretically, funding is a key indicator of institutionalisation. But in this instance the funding did not come from the institution, and was not obtained using institutional fund-raising procedures. However, because of the university's historical relationship with the Mellon Foundation, and the tacit support I had been able to negotiate from my line manager, the institution was prepared to receive and manage the funding, essentially for a project over which they exercised no control and which was to be spent at first on women from my university and later extended to women from other higher education institutions in the region.

In spite of subsequently relocating its office and becoming an independent non-profit organisation, HERS-SA has maintained a connection with the university, mainly through my joint responsibilities and the support of women in the human resources department. The university continues to allow HERS-SA to access donors through its structures, and over the years – in response to invitations from HERS-SA – the university has supported the participation of over 150 of its women in the various HERS-SA programmes. In addition, seven members of the university executive have made presentations in HERS-SA programmes. The institution has allowed individuals to encounter HERS-SA as something outside of its boundaries, but it has not taken the opportunity to embrace HERS-SA as part of its transformation initiative. The interview data suggests that this lack of interest has nothing to do with HERS-SA; rather, it is because the patriarchal culture of the university has not allowed the university to regard gender as a serious issue beyond the counting of statistics.

### *Interview data*

The interviews provide insight into the university's rhetoric around gender and participants' perceptions of the gendered culture, and reveal a lack of focus on gender in institutional transformation programmes. They also show an institutional culture that 'others' people into groups and 'disappears' gender

issues. The latter is clearly illustrated in the language used when talking about the HERS-SA initiative and by the naivety displayed regarding gender issues.

Gender forms part of equity policies and values and is cited in the institutional mission statement, along with race and disability. Despite this, none of the participants were aware of any university programme, beyond HERS-SA, that focused specifically on women. Several of the participants suggested that gender issues are addressed as part of the several institutional transformation programmes, but through the language used regarding these programmes, it emerged that they also tended to 'disappear' gender into the rhetoric of transformation and diversity and have an emphasis on numbers.

I have been arguing this, [we] don't have any concept paper or, or, or clear understanding of women's position... besides the figures, the stats. And the university has based its employment, its transformation strategy on numbers. Chasing numbers in a, in a, in a way that has been totally unstrategic, I think... One really needs to understand what the specific positional problems are of the designated groups. (black woman administrator).

Discussion of the institutional transformation programmes also reveals some of the complexity of effecting change in this liberal, individualistic environment. People do not want to be told how they should change their behaviour, and they do not wish to be put into 'groups' or to coalesce (and be identified as part of a 'group') to take up a common cause:

...the culture at [the university], I think it's also a question of being labelled, to belong to the group. People are very concerned... for some individuals it doesn't matter to be identified as this or that, you know, for others it, they find it fearful or unacceptable, or whatever it is and I suppose we, with the women issues, we fall in that thing. I don't know... (white woman administrator).

I think that in this place, at the places where I am, there is certainly a, a gender awareness, academically almost, I think. There is a, there is an awareness of that, its politically sensitive, one of those topics, and it comes under the banner of all the other things you know, previously disadvantaged groups, disability, gender, homosexuality, you know, it falls into that frame of, I don't know, that that *group* that we have to deal with... (white woman administrator).

All the participants verbalise a need to improve the gendered culture of the institution:

We have not reached a stage of gender equality in higher education. Look at the stats, look at the imbalances in rank. You take the academics for example, I mean there is a huge way to go, huge way to go... (white male administrator).

The interviews suggest that academic women experience the gendered institutional culture more favourably: "I found it was difficult to establish my credibility, but having done that, I feel quite comfortable" (white woman academic). This contrasts with the strong negative feelings expressed by two of the black administrative women. One said: "I always found that the marginalisation in the way is somehow double if you are in the [administration], in a way. Or not necessarily marginalisation, but the opportunities are fewer." And another, who describes herself as "not taken seriously as a person", also says: "I, I, it's the only job I have ever worked in where my, I feel like everything has been taken from me for it, nothing's been put back."

It was evident that the women, particularly in the administration, experienced the university environment as pressurised and complex and there is a latent discourse of struggling to survive or fit in: "...the environment we work in is so complicated and so totally difficult in a sense, and fast and furious... (white woman administrator).

Describing a discriminatory experience, one of the participants explains that she did not perceive her treatment as deliberate discrimination, but attributes it rather to a naivety, a culture that is unaware of how it is discriminating against women:

The most wonderful comment that was made to me: it also came to my attention that I was far more poorly paid than any other professor, and again I was doing the comparison to a male colleague and I was saying, "But you know I am far more productive" and whatever. And my dear dean, who I am very fond of, looked at me and said "Because we had to put him on a par with the salaries of other professors." And I said, "And what am I?" [laughter]. And it's a, it's a, it's a complete naivety, I, I know my dean would be mortified at the idea that he could, um, [not notice that it was happening] ja, ja (white woman academic).

Despite describing a negative gendered environment, the lack of any action or involvement, particularly by the women, suggests that in the reality of their daily experience in the institution, this is not a priority. A contributing factor to this is likely to be the vanishing of gender in the university discourse, a vanishing that became evident as participants spoke of their experiences.

This was demonstrated by perceptions of the institutional responses to addressing gender issues, and in the participants' use of language:

I think there is a sensitivity that gender issues are important and... we need to address them, but I don't experience a deep grappling with what that really means... I have not been in a conversation that interrogates directly what that issue is... I have not seen Council consider a change strategy to, to, I have not seen a, the [Institutional Forum] do it, I have not seen committees make a discussion around it, you know, and as I say, I don't think its particularly that they don't, they aren't aware or they they're anti it, I think we are just in that block of things that we all know we should address at some point but its not. (white woman administrator).

The way participants respond in the interviews suggests that gender issues are a cause of some discomfort within the university community and this also results in gender being 'disappeared' and not taken seriously. At the leadership level, this disappearing takes place by conflating gender into the institutional rhetoric of diversity and excellence.

I don't think its simply numbers. We are strengthened by diversity and diversity adds to excellence, and gender diversity must add to excellence as much as racial diversity and other forms of, not in a simple numbers game, but in terms of the value of diversity in a place like this, in a university. (white male executive).

This disappearing is also evident in individuals' use of language in the interviews. Despite making such remarks as: "[HERS-SA] seems to me a really excellent programme, quite innovative... people have come away energised and empowered", language is repeatedly used to reduce the impact of HERS-SA. An analysis of the interviews with almost all the participants reveals underlying discourses that suggest an attempt to contain and diminish HERS-SA. Participants associate the initiative with the non-academic, lower-paid sectors in the university, "women in the lower pay classes" and "... sort of middle management [administrative] women." A male executive uses ridicule as a technique to dismiss HERS-SA when he suggests that it might operate "as a bunch of women flying a flag." Descriptors such as "a very small programme" (this despite the fact that over 800 women from across the continent have participated in HERS-SA programmes) also serve to diminish the initiative. A senior male participant, while making positive remarks about the initiative, nevertheless felt compelled to diminish the programme by adding: "I am not sure what HERS actually is. Is it two persons and a dog?"

Most of the participants make suggestions as to how they feel HERS-SA could be more effective, reflecting a power dynamic that attempts to position HERS-SA as deficient both as a concept and an organisation, and which passes on the responsibility for institutional gendered change to HERS-SA. Despite saying that he knew very little about HERS-SA, one of the men interviewed was vociferous in his criticisms. He suggests that HERS-SA needs to “review itself and establish its real relevance, and its *real* contribution and maybe a change in direction”, otherwise he suggests it is “going to just become another bunch of women talking”.

A participant with responsibility for human resources, who would be expected to have approved the participation of the nearly 50 university women in the three major HERS-SA programmes (requiring them to be off campus for a minimum of a week), describes his knowledge of HERS-SA as “I also sort of listened to some of the conversations in the passage and so on, and it really was, for me, women living in a bubble isolated from the rest of the world.” This dismissive attitude speaks both to the low priority he assigns to a feminist intervention and shows a patronising tolerance which has allowed professional women in his university to have cumulatively spent well over two years of university time “living in a bubble”.

This attitude is echoed in institutional responses to positive individual experiences which reveal how these are downplayed in a way that limits their potential impact within the university. There is no evidence of any attempt to capitalise on an individual experience to benefit the university:

I don't feel that what should happen, that because you have been to HERS therefore you should be up for promotion, or whatever the case may be, but, but something happened to you. You did experience something very unique and, and, at least you must have a space to, to, to, to, to, um, I don't want to say it in a clichéd way, now plough back into the institution in some way. (black woman administrator).

She has subsequently left the university. Another participant also recognises that the institution is not gaining from the individual experiences: “... a lot of women are going for personal development, and then how is that integrated back into the work, into the environment? And I don't know to what extent it really is integrated.” (white woman administrator).

A human resources professional is happy to describe HERS-SA as “sort of plugged in on the side” and explains that “there isn't an interface with formal people development processes”. Individual women are allowed to participate

in a feminist initiative but their experiences are not integrated into the functioning of the institution.

The low priority accorded to gender issues is reflected in the considerable naivety regarding gender and effecting gender-based change shown by many of the participants, even on the part of professionals who might be expected to be responsible for moving the institution towards equity. One of the human resources professionals describes herself as having “an insight into women and their issues”, but also clearly states that “... I am fatigued by this kind of activism around gender and race issues, so I don’t think that it’s called for, activism around that.”

Another says: “I have never gotten a sense that HERS or anything for that matter, any programme for that matter, can suddenly heighten gender awareness.” (black woman administrator).

Despite most of the participants being careful to present themselves as having expertise of some sort, providing a revealing insight into the value hierarchy of the academic environment, the interviews provide no evidence of any serious theorisation about gender or implementing gender-based change, and proficiency in these is clearly not perceived as a requirement. This speaks to the priorities of the institution and suggests an inability to initiate or even respond to gender-based change. This is clearly illustrated by the complete lack of understanding of the HERS-SA philosophy displayed by one of the women human resources professionals, who complained: “Why can’t [your programmes] be for men and women?”

There is also a lack of understanding of the impact of the patriarchal environment on women’s career development, shown by the four participants with professional responsibility related to equity and human resource development. Although most of the participants speak of having knowledge about gender discrimination in the workplace, none of them describe this knowledge as leading to individual or institutional action. No evidence is provided in the interviews that either positional power or perception of the injustices of gendered power structures has stimulated any of them to take responsibility for bringing about a change in the gendered climate of the institution (despite five of the participants having participated in HERS-SA programmes!).

## The gender phenomenon

The data reveals a university that most of the women interviewed experienced as stressful, particularly the non-academic women. Gender issues are a

component of this stress, and there is an awareness that something ought to be done about inequitable gendered power dynamics, but nobody knows what to do or wants to be seen to be associated with a gender-based initiative. Below I discuss a number of ways in which gender emerges from the data as an institutional dynamic.

### *Gender as rhetoric*

Gender is named as a component of the university's equity rhetoric where it forms part of equity policies and demographic counts. The mission statement and equity policies include gender with race, religion, and disability, but interview data and analysis of university documentation leaves little doubt that the first and most important of these is race. The university leadership is clearly proud of its public stance against racial discrimination (Shackleton, 2006a). In contrast, there is no record of a public declaration showing a deep understanding of the impact of gender-based discrimination. In South Africa, where gender has historically received a lower priority than race, I suggest that the national context (in which gender is conflated into diversity) allows institutions to focus on the more politically hegemonic issue of race. This has the effect of weakening the institutional imperative for bringing about gender-based change. This is particularly the situation in previously 'white' institutions.

Despite being part of the liberal rhetoric and a component of the transformation that the university so desperately seeks, my research shows a remarkable ignorance of gender issues, particularly on the part of those with formal responsibility for human relations and transformation. People speak with confidence about gender but reveal a lack of serious engagement with the realities of gendered power relations or theorisation around gender in the workplace. Beneath the rhetoric, gender appears to be understood in terms of numbers of men and women; consequently, institutional efforts aim to bring about greater equity focus on increasing numbers of women. This shallow understanding of gender suggests that as an aspect of human relations in the workplace, gender has a low institutional priority.

### *The vanishing of gender*

An important manifestation of the gendered climate is the pervasive vanishing of gender in the institution, which is revealed in a number of ways by my data. Institutional and individual lack of action portrays an institution in which gender relations are not considered to be an issue. There

is recognition of some inequity in numbers of women and men, particularly in senior academic positions, but unlike the gross legalised racial inequities of apartheid, the gender-based inequities in the civilised, liberal university environment are much more subtle. In the post-apartheid era, overcoming racial inequities and ensuring racial reconciliation are a national priority. Gender is also mentioned: however, my findings have shown little evidence in reality of any institutional attention being focused on gender as an issue, let alone a priority.

The interviews also reveal the very low profile of gender issues. There is remarkably little awareness of the influence of gendered power relations in the workplace, and individuals show very little commitment to doing anything about it. There seems to be a reluctant acceptance of the way that things are. People are too busy keeping up with the masculine, aggressive demands of the institution, or too wary of being seen to be associated with women's issues, to challenge the system or to attempt to bring about any changes. When specific gender challenges are made, there is an institutional reaction to neutralise them, as illustrated by my data, which revealed the micro-political processes that attempted to contain and diminish HERS-SA as an overtly feminist activity.

### *Mystification*

In the strongly male institutional culture of higher education, the significance of gender as a factor influencing the working environment is reduced. This is achieved by the hegemony of the masculine norm and, as my data has shown, by the lack of any real engagement with gender, the low priority assigned to it as a transformation issue, and by a pervasive vanishing. At one level, interaction with my participants suggests that in the tolerant, liberal university environment, gender issues are not significant, yet both my women participants and I clearly experience the gendered culture as confusing and disempowering. I found this acceptance of the status quo and apathy towards improving the gendered culture mystifying and disturbing. Did it mean that the gendered culture of the institution was not as hostile as personal experience suggested? In an attempt to benchmark the gender sensitivity of the university, I undertook a visioning process to explore what a gender-sensitive campus might look like. I identified a number of changes that could eliminate gender-based power inequities and result in an environment where gender would not function as a determinant of allocating power and

resources, and would not define identities or trajectories. By comparing this ideal with my lived reality, I was able to see clearly the gap between what was possible and the current situation, and thus validate my experiences.

I report on this visioning exercise because I found it to be particularly valuable in revealing how I was seduced by the power of the university's liberal rhetoric and ability to vanish the gender agenda. Despite my years of experiencing the gendered climate of the institution, like my participants I was confused about my perceptions and had a compulsion to 'verify' my experiences. This uncertainty speaks strongly to the ability of the gendered institutional culture to disempower and mystify those embraced by it.

## Conclusion

Parker (2000: 217) described institutional culture as "a process of making claims about difference and similarity between persons in an organization, making divisions between 'us' and 'them'". My feminist methodology has successfully revealed the fragmentation that takes place in the academic environment and the impact that this has on reinforcing the status quo. My results reveal a culture that, in common with many other international studies in organisations, and in universities in particular, dismisses gender as an institutional dynamic, thus perpetuating the hegemony of the male norm. This is despite the strong equity legislation in South Africa and the pressure being exerted on higher education for transformation.

The data revealed that women, particularly black women in the administration, experience the environment as strongly disempowering. This suggests that the intersection of gender with race and academic and non-academic standing is a determinant of an individual's alignment with the institutional culture. Most remarkable is the naivety and complacency exhibited concerning gendered power relations in the university environment, even on the part of people responsible for equity.

One can speculate on the influence of the liberal, individualistic discourse of academia: it results in a culture that isolates individuals and assigns them full responsibility for their situation. The atomisation and othering of people in the institution – caused by positioning as academic or administrative, division into faculties and departments, and the strong academic hierarchy, in addition to issues of race, gender, class and age – and their reluctance to be identified as part of a "group" precludes collective action to do with gender.

Thus, although women experience the gendered climate as uncomfortable, the institutional culture assists in helping them to disappear the underlying causes of their discomfort. A liberal, tolerant, paternal attitude makes activism seem ludicrous and pushing for change seem churlish. Clearly this has implications for bringing about change in the academic environment, suggesting that transformation initiatives need first to address the culture that exalts the individual, and thereafter need to explore ways to replace it with pride in a common collective identity.

My research has shown how the gendered culture of the case university reflects that of other, similar institutions described in the literature. I believe that my findings about factors contributing to the conservative patriarchal environment have a wider relevance. I suggest that my theorisation regarding fragmentation in the academic environment and the incapacitation of collective action within a culture espousing liberal, individualistic ideals provides new insights into forces maintaining androcentric hegemony.

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## Endnotes

- 1 My use of "liberal" in this context incorporates the privileging of individual rights and tolerance of freedom of speech and thought. Government and other authorities are expected to have limited power to intervene in personal freedoms. The rule of law is considered important to protect equality of opportunity for all.
- 2 HERS-SA is not an abbreviation like the American HERS but the full name of the organisation.
- 3 For example, the Higher Education Resources Development (HERS) Mid-America programme in the United States, the Australian Technology Network (ATN) Women's Executive Development (WEXDEV) programme in Australia, the American Council on Education (ACE) Office of Women in Higher Education (OWHE).



# "Feeling the disconnect": Teaching sexualities and gender in South African higher education

Jane Bennett and Vasu Reddy

## Introduction

"Crowded out by the dead" is the title of a two-page article in the latest issue of *Drum* (20 September, 2007; #783). The piece is written by Liezel Steenkamp, a regular contributor to the popular South African magazine, which sells 25 000 copies a week.<sup>1</sup> *Drum's* market has changed since its inception in the 1950s as one of the most vibrant sources of political and social information for young black men moving into urban settings.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, while the target market is still black, mid-low-income South Africans, *Drum* magazine works at an angle to the slick and high-powered voice of *Y Magazine* (which surveys the *loxion kulcha*, fashion drama, and media-focused interests of a fast-moving and wealthy – or would-be wealthy – urban black youth) or to the business-oriented black masculinity of *Pace*. Like both *Y Magazine* and *Pace*, *Drum* includes material on socially important events (the funeral of soccer star Gift Leremi),<sup>3</sup> and the lives of TV soap actors and actresses. But *Drum* consistently highlights what is special or interesting about the lives of "ordinary" people: Bubele Mhlana, the first black captain in the South African Navy, shown working in his garden with his two children; Cordelia Molwea reading the Bible to her small daughter in Sepedi, so that the girl does not forget her mother tongue.

*Drum* also has a particular editorial commitment to the issues of HIV and AIDS. In every issue, there are several readers' letters on the topic, and there are frequent feature articles about the consequences of the virus, stories of heroic families and campaigns, and images of families where children have been adopted after the deaths of their parents.

"Crowded out by the dead" introduces the dilemma of Newcastle, a town in KwaZulu-Natal (the province hit hardest by HIV and AIDS in South Africa).<sup>4</sup>

Here, we read, 22 000 people are dying a year, half the pregnant women who visit the antenatal clinics in two municipalities are HIV-positive, and the town is running out of burial space. The facts offered by the piece are devastating enough, but what makes the two pages of information almost unreadable is the photograph upon which the words are printed. There is an image of a grey wasteland across both pages: mound after mound after mound of charcoal gravel and stone stretch out as far as the horizon, awkward chunks of corrugated iron standing in for headstones, the names (barely legible) painted roughly in yellow, white, black. There is no room even to walk between the mounds; on top of one mound stands a small red pot.

Within South Africa, the challenges of HIV/AIDS can be readily enumerated: the struggle to contain and prevent new transmissions; the politicised and fraught terrain of treatment; the economic implications of home-based care for the ill and dying; the challenge of loving and nurturing children (and others) left in the wake of death; the imminent collapse of certain hospital systems and the strain on all medical resources; the disappearance of teachers, nurses, labourers, fathers, politicians, and singers from their posts.

It is also true that significant victories have been achieved: excellent legislation on non-discrimination towards HIV-positive people, vibrant (if occasionally infuriating) debate at governmental and NGO levels, and ongoing work at every level of society to illuminate the severity of the epidemic as a threat to the very foundations of democracy. Those engaged as feminist activists and researchers have for the past decade been vigorously addressing the challenges of living in a country in which issues of sexualities and gender are dominated by the realities of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Such work has been undertaken at multiple sites of intervention: state-affiliated, NGO-based, community-organised. This work has also unfolded within higher education, which has seen the emergence of critical research units and activist organisations on different campuses.<sup>5</sup> For those located in higher education as faculty, one area remains relatively unexamined: the questions raised by HIV and AIDS, as a national crisis, for those who work as teaching faculty within South African higher education.

While some universities have begun to develop policies on HIV and AIDS, and many include pockets of activism (driven by student representative councils, or units attached to the university itself), the meaning of designing syllabi and imagining pedagogic practices equipped to interact with the images of Newcastle's graveyards is – at a level of national concern – rarely explored. This article emerges from a concern not with research (as one arm of the

“core business” of higher education), but with teaching, arguably the most immediately powerful wing of a university’s engagement with the world.

In Newcastle, Steenkamp’s article says, “They can’t even say ‘AIDS’... the nearest they’ll get is to mention ‘the sickness’, ‘this thing’”.<sup>6</sup>

What does it mean to work as a *teacher* within contexts in which issues of sexualities and gender include the “unsayables” of AIDS, the fraught discourses of ARVs, or the fact that South African undergraduates are, by and large, young men and women born in the mid-1980s, who have never had personal knowledge of a world in which options for sexual pleasure, reproductive health, or desire were not publicly wrapped in the realities of sick babies, dying friends, endless injunctions around abstinence/condoms/illness, strange medicines, and myriad overt and subterranean conversations about “*this thing*”? While it is true that the young men and women who gain access to higher education within South Africa remain a minority, privileged by class, that is not in itself a reason to ignore concern with the pedagogies of sexuality and gender in university spaces. We would suggest that precisely because of the privilege of these spaces, the exploration of how, where, and why teaching occurs is critical to understanding the role national university education is currently playing in transforming the graveyard mounds of Newcastle into a language of survival, or, further: resistance, reclamation.

## Locating research on teaching sexualities and gender in South African higher education

Over the past ten years, parallel sets of research interests have galvanised thinking in the African context within circles of researchers and practitioners concerned with the meanings of “gender activism” on the continent. One strong set has involved intensive engagement with issues of sexuality. Debates concerning the importance of engaging with policy and programme work that can integrate feminist insights on gender constructions with diverse theorisations of sexuality have resulted in a number of critical publications and events. The first post-1975 decades of feminist research and activism concentrated on changing the material conditions of women’s oppression in African contexts, in the mid-late twentieth century, prioritising issues of political representation and access to resources (land, education, and reproductive healthcare). In the exploration of gender-based violence, issues of the body and sexuality emerged, but rarely as questions demanding focused research in their own right.

Since the 1990s, however, this profile has changed. The combination of (1) broad-based policy and advocacy work on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, (2) the recognition that policy initiatives frequently fail because of inadequate recognition of the ways in which sexuality, culture, and identity organise the possibilities of “policy uptake” within different contexts, and (3) the growing interest in notions of sexual citizenship within emerging democracies, has led to increased engagement in African-based questions of gender and sexuality.

Such engagement has been visible across diverse spheres: new NGOs have been formed to spearhead educational and policy projects, legal reform to do with notions of “sexual rights” and “sexual citizenship” has been initiated, debates concerning the meaning of globalisation for sexual commodification and trade have become prevalent in discussions of poverty and development, and new research programmes with specific interest in sexualities within African contexts have been developed. Such programmes have been explicit about the need to research sexualities within African contexts from a perspective sensitive to the colonial, exoticising, gaze of earlier Western anthropology (Arnfred, 2004) and with a clear commitment to designing theoretical and methodological approaches capable of envisioning continentally indigenous and politically transformative knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

The need to integrate challenges of gender dynamics into continent-wide higher education debates (looking at issues of globalisation, academic freedom, access, citizenship and nationalism) constitutes a key contribution to a robust discourse on epistemology, and higher education in African contexts. Feminist analysis of political space, for example, interacts with either partnership or with challenge in relation to traditional departments of political studies; feminist theorisation of the body finds itself in complex, not always amicable, dialogue with theories of post-colonialism, performance, and representation, and so on. However, it has been much easier to demand that disciplines such as psychology and education integrate feminist questions about gender dynamics than it has been to insist on the essential connection between sexualities and gender. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that ideas about sexualities emerge in very diverse disciplines. If the term ‘sexualities’ encompasses ideas about the body, reproduction, desire, trade, health, representation and social organisation, its relevance permeates different “knowledges” (gynaecology; history; film), each of which approaches the relevance of sexualities with a distinct lens, and not necessarily a lens simultaneously interested in feminist understandings of gender.

After researching the options available to South African students for contemporary, high-quality, life-salient university education on sexualities and gender, we had to acknowledge that very little is known about how the research and teaching of sexualities in South African higher education occurs across disciplines (such as public health, medicine, law, gender/women's studies (G/WS), social anthropology, cultural studies, and so on). Connections and disjunctures across diverse research initiatives, a highly complex issue, remain outside the purview of this article. But the possibility of looking at the salience of university teaching within "sexualities and gender" in South Africa was opened by an invitation for a small South African project to join an international team, headed by the Women's Studies Department of El Colegio de Mexico, the prestigious graduate university of Mexico City.

The South African team involved researchers at the African Gender Institute (Professor Jane Bennett) and at the Human Sciences Research Council's Gender and Development Unit (Professor Vasu Reddy). The invitation to us, from Professor Adriana Ortiz Ortega, was to join a five-country project looking at the interaction of higher education and sexualities and gender, with a particular focus on teaching. The project included Mexico, China, Chile, Argentina and South Africa, and the full results of the international research are to be published by El Colegio de Mexico early in 2008.

As South Africans, we wanted to map the terrain of disciplinary engagement with sexualities and gender in South African higher education, with introductory research into the teaching of sexualities and gender in higher education institutions in South Africa. The focus on teaching was chosen as a way of highlighting the importance of the connection between university classrooms and the environments beyond those classrooms, represented through students' needs and through university faculty, positioned as they are within the politics of higher education itself.

The broad motivation for undertaking such a project was twofold. Firstly, theories on the history and culture of higher education institutions suggest the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of institutional norms within African (and indeed, global) higher education systems. These norms include curricular approaches to the body, identities, sexualities and the relevance of such concepts to diverse disciplines. Such norms are however constantly under negotiation, and have been challenged in a number of ways by feminists, especially feminist academics and teachers within diverse disciplines. There is a need to know more about how such challenges have approached issues of pedagogy, in South African

territory. Has the national discourse on “gender equality” at a constitutional level impacted in any way on the representations of “women”, “men” and sexualities within the paradigms through which the body is “taught” to young doctors, anthropologists, lawyers, cultural critics, and economists?

Secondly, theories on the institutional culture of higher education institutions also argue that while such institutions are key forces in the production of “professional” citizenship, they also construct gendered norms of sexuality (heterosexuality) that embed such citizenship into conservative notions of reproduction, sexual moralities, and “respectability”. How to “teach gender and sexuality” in environments which work to construct conservative gendered citizenship has been a focus of research in secondary education systems in some African contexts.<sup>8</sup> Within South African contexts, too, there has been strong state-driven interest in school syllabi on sex education (still focused mainly on issues of physical development, morality, and health, but nonetheless present as a “subject”) and also ongoing work against sexual harassment, which continually raises questions of gender, violence, and sexuality.

The opportunity to work within an international team led us to design a project involving several different components:

- (a) the production of a database of information, covering baseline data on the numbers of higher-education sites (within departments, faculties, and institutions) at which issues of gender and sexuality are addressed, the range of courses and modules available, the curricula used, a breakdown of the resources drawn upon by these curricula, and the pool of academics currently teaching in the area(s);
- (b) intensive engagement with faculty, based in different disciplines, regarding their pedagogic principles and practices, located as these are within specific disciplinary paradigms, teaching contexts, and political locations and histories;
- (c) feedback from students involved in selected sites of teaching in order to develop a research strategy for uncovering the meaning of courses within students' social, political and academic lives.

The project was recognised at the outset as one which was simultaneously ambitious and introductory. We had no expectation of doing more than looking for the right questions to ask of the South African “gender and sexualities” pedagogic landscape within higher education. In the next sections, we share some of our preliminary findings as a way of opening up a dialogue on pedagogies, gender and sexuality within higher education, both within South Africa and more broadly across the continent.

## Critical starting points

In 2007, debates on sexualities include debates on the meaning of rights, as articulated through recent international movements seeking to leverage space for sexual, reproductive and cultural agency. These movements are embedded in diverse activist histories – feminist, queer, and socialist – and there is not always agreement about the priorities of a sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Across the continent, the need to combat the transmission of HIV, to curtail sexual violence, and to ensure that women and girls have access to education, healthcare, and political rights as basic conditions of democracy has increasingly placed issues of sexuality at the forefront of theoretical and activist engagements with the state. The terms in which “sexualities” are brought to the fore as legal and political terrain remain contested – it is easier to insert conceptions of “sexuality” into frameworks of health than it is to discuss sexualities as sources of empowerment; constraint and “management” are often more audible as political approaches to sexuality than exploration or alliance-building across diverse “sexual” constituencies. Nonetheless, African-based debate on theoretical – and activist – engagement with local and continental struggles to understand the links between sexualities, gender, and socio-economic space is vigorous, nuanced, and valuable.

In South Africa, this debate currently cuts across several different political issues: the failure of the state to implement its ARV programme wholeheartedly in the face of an HIV and AIDS epidemic that is devastating the whole Southern African region; the integration of HIV and AIDS as an issue in the succession question for the ANC, in ways that are both vicious and complex; the validity of the Termination of Pregnancy Act (recently referred back to Parliament by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that, in 1996, there had not been enough popular participation in debates around certain clauses); the changing legislation on marriage – which (differently) impacts Muslim personal law, customary rights, and the rights of gay and lesbian people to marry; the outlawing of surrogate motherhood as a paid contractual arrangement; the processes of the new Sexual Offences Bill; the significance of the trial of Jacob Zuma, charged with rape in 2005 and acquitted in 2006 in a verdict that split the nation around the meaning of rape; the attempts to change legislation on trafficking; the attempts to subject the media to pre-publication government censorship on the grounds that this will decrease child pornography; the fact that 54 000 secondary school girls “dropped out” in 2006 because of pregnancy.

Within this national context, sexualities constitute a live zone of continuous negotiation for rights, where masculinities and femininities are deployed both as points of access and as barriers to social justice. For young South Africans, a critical education in sexualities and gender struck us as a prerequisite for engaging citizenship, and this project offered an opportunity to understand what those in higher education could be expected to encounter as part and parcel of their academic and professional development.

With these as starting points, we began the work of mapping what was available to South African university students as “education in sexualities and gender”. We used three different routes: intensive web-scanning; the collection and coding of faculty handbooks (listing course offerings in all disciplines and faculties on different campuses); and communication with faculty members in different universities and disciplines willing to share syllabi, put us in touch with other teachers, and alert us to zones of teaching on their own campuses invisible through web-pages or academic handbooks. Because our team was small, we were aware from the outset of our vulnerabilities (nothing “comprehensive” was likely to be achieved), and proceeded with respect for the fact that the information we gathered has to be considered with as much caution as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Any national survey of university curricula needs to acknowledge that between 2003 and 2005, the higher education sector in South Africa has gone through a large restructuring process, in order to attempt to address some of the imbalances caused by apartheid policies and legacies, which segregated educational opportunities at every level through racial classification and allocated resources in accordance with the racialised prioritisation of campuses. According to the state, South African higher education is being restructured to “eradicate racial duplications created under apartheid, to cut costs and improve efficiency across the sector, and to build stronger and better institutions able to produce more and better graduates.” Transformation of the higher education sector through institutional mergers and incorporations is intended to construct the foundations for a higher education system that is more in line with the vision and values of democratic development.

Throughout the country there have been multiple debates about the relationship between the intended effects of the mergers, and those unintended (such as the lack of “merger-stress” placed on the most well-resourced universities). The number of public institutions has been reduced through mergers and incorporations affecting most of the country’s former 36

institutions. The changes involve both (a) the restructuring of some institutions (technikons) which did not formerly offer degrees, but rather technical and professional tertiary education, into degree-granting “universities”, and (b) the merger of university campuses, in similar geographical regions, but with vastly different race/class-based constituencies.

There are now 22 universities in South Africa, but some of them have roots within the old apartheid system and carry the legacies of that (either in ways which privilege them – the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town are two of these – or in ways that leave them largely deprived of the resources they need to cope with massive increases in student demand, such as Walter Sisulu University). Others are completely new organisations, created by merging and renaming two previously separate higher education institutions. Mapping the course offerings available within a university is thus a task in which it would be easy to overlook options, because of the fluidity in the structure of a particular university.

The library of available websites was unstable, but was nevertheless a useful place to start to map the faculties, departments, schools and institutes located in each university. University websites provided access to faculty and departmental websites and these were then scanned for degrees and diplomas for courses that integrate gender and/or sexuality as part of the coursework. At the onset of the research, it was assumed that sexualities would not be taught in certain faculties and departments; namely agriculture, natural sciences, and engineering. However we did scan these courses, and our assumptions were confirmed.

As part of the scanning process, we used the words “sex”, “sexuality”, “gender”, “masculinity”, “women”, and “femininity” to search the website for courses. Within medical faculties, these terms were not useful at all, and instead we used the terms “reproduction”, “sexual dysfunction”, “maternal health”, “gynaecology”, “sexually transmitted disease” and “sexual health” to highlight teaching areas to which we needed to pay attention. Courses that were recorded for the purposes of the project were: (a) courses that made explicit reference to “gender” and/or “sexuality” in the course title and/or course outline, and (b) courses that made reference to topics related to sexuality (such as HIV transmission, or teenage pregnancy). Where courses were identified, we made no assumptions about the approach of the curriculum, nor the way in which issues of gender and sexualities might be connected to one another; we were simply seeking to sketch a general profile of the entry points through which

South African students might encounter questions of the body, rights, or health through the broadest of relations to gender or sexualities.

Other than the formal courses offered to registered students, courses being offered in workshops and seminars for professionals both inside and outside of the university in question were also recorded as “short courses”. These are offered by research units/groupings that operate as part of the faculty.

The search of the university websites allowed us to begin to map a national array of courses that integrate gender and sexuality into the curricula. Then we acquired as many formal university academic handbooks as possible (these handbooks list the formal options available to all students in hard copy, and are much more detailed than web-based information, in many cases). This was an arduous and time-consuming process, and we could not obtain all universities’ compendia of handbooks. Finally, once we were sure that a relevant course was being offered at a particular university, the lecturers and/or course conveners were contacted by email. A list of contacts was compiled, indicating the contact’s title, name, the name of the course taught by the contact, and the department and faculty in which the contact is located. Where no email address was available on the Internet, the university was telephoned and the email address obtained. We sent each contact a letter informing them of our research, asking them for further information about (a) the specific course that led us to them, (b) any information about other teaching and research that they may be involved in, and (c) other people within the university that they could refer us to. At least one contact, and often more, from each university was invited to participate in the research.

Our approach to mapping, through keywords in the title or brief course description in handbooks, clearly leaves out the possibility that courses may be taught (in any discipline) in ways that highlight gender analysis and/or interrogate issues of sexualities without having this visible at the surface level of a brief course description. Thus a course on “Holocaust history” may very well include an interest in the gender dynamics operative within that history, or a course on “African media of the 20 century” may address the representation of sexualities. Looking for “gender and sexualities” through course descriptions only blinds us to other – more interesting – possibilities. Nevertheless, we used the data we had to “read” as an incoming student, interested in questions of gender and sexualities, might read: “what is in the handbook, within my chosen programme? What can I find on the departmental or faculty website, if I am interested in sexual rights, HIV

prevention, the physico-medical repair of anal rape, desire and psychoanalysis, the economics of sex work and tourism?”

Several key findings emerged from our preliminary audit.

Firstly, although it was possible to find course offerings within almost all universities surveyed which drew on the term “gender” (or “women”), these were few by comparison to the overall number of courses offered by the universities, and heavily concentrated in the humanities and social sciences (aside from medical curricula on reproductive health, gynaecology and obstetrics, which assumed “women”). Of these courses, while the spread of disciplines in which “gender and ...” courses were visible (usually one within a department) was very broad, the term “sexuality” surfaced much less frequently. With a few exceptions (such as an undergraduate course in “Sex, Culture and Society”, offered by the Anthropology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, a specialist graduate course on Sexual Rights offered by the Law School at the University of the Free State, and a course offered by the Classics Unit of the University of Cape Town School of Languages, “Sex from Sappho to Cyber”), most courses using the term “sexuality” within their title or brief course description were offered by G/WS departments. We found only one course in schools or faculties of health sciences that explicitly named sexualities as a curriculum interest (at the University of Pretoria’s Faculty of Health Sciences).<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, although departments (except for G/WS departments) usually seemed to house only one “gender and/or sexualities” course within their suite, the spread of departments and disciplines open to the consideration of gender and sexualities was very diverse. Despite the overall paucity of available courses at a surface level, the sheer spread of interests through which gender and sexualities can become part of a curriculum focus was interesting: courses explicitly looking at gender and sexualities could be found in almost every discipline (although not, of course, within every discipline in every university). Preliminary probing into this leads us to suggest that very frequently, where the teacher has had intellectual and activist experience in issues of social justice, including feminism, she or he is likely to bring questions of sexualities and gender into their syllabus, regardless of discipline. Without such experience, the curriculum – in any discipline – is likely to remain blind to the complex politics of gender and sexualities issues.

Thirdly, it is clear that key disciplines uniformly on offer to incoming undergraduates in most South African universities incorporate the potential

for teaching gender and sexualities. This may seem like an obvious point to a feminist reader, but it is worth spelling out. Within the law faculties, for example, questions of gender and sexuality were observed as being taught and integrated into the law curricula primarily through the departments of constitutional law, criminal law (criminology and criminal justice), private law, and public law. Sexuality is integrated into some law courses in relation to human rights (particularly sexual and reproductive rights),<sup>11</sup> but our survey suggested this is not a widespread approach at the level of course description. Determining whether legal faculty teachers approach the issues in a way informed by contemporary theory on the law, gender, and sexualities would require further investigation. We would see, for example, the following broad categories of the law as inherently gendered, and having the potential for the integration of gendered and sexual theorising: family law (the law of marriage, divorce and custody); criminology (the study of crime); human rights (sexual and reproductive rights, and the rights of children); and so on.

Within the health sciences, too, there is evidence that issues of gender and sexualities are regularly taught in the following departments: nursing, obstetrics and gynaecology, urology, public health, family and community health. From both course descriptions, and from (later) interviews with medical teaching faculty in four universities, bio-medical and development approaches dominate the teachings of gender and sexuality offered in the health sciences. With few exceptions, the survey indicates so far that sexuality is taught as “reproduction” or, occasionally (especially concerning youth) in relation to “risk” or “dysfunction” and is largely taught in isolation to the teaching of gender (e.g. gender as power relations, gender as access to medical resources, gendered analysis of health management systems, gender and epidemiology). Where there are innovative courses in “Gender and Health,” such as that offered at the University of Cape Town’s Public Health department, there is almost no focus on issues of sexualities.<sup>12</sup>

Obstetrics and gynaecology also teach aspects of sexualities (female), and courses include: women’s reproductive health, sexual reproductive health, maternal and child health and risks associated with pregnancy, and contraception. The researchers identified subjects or courses that are taught in the health sciences faculties that were assumed, by the researchers, to be gendered (i.e., an analysis of gender is critical to a valuable teaching of the subject), but in which gender was not mentioned at all in the course outlines.

It is clear that at multiple points, health sciences courses hold enormous potential for thinking through a critical analysis of gendered relations, and a sophisticated understanding of sexualities. At this point, it is not likely that such analysis is pervasive, but it is obvious that the intellectual and practical expertises introduced through health sciences hold great potential for excellent gender and sexualities education, despite the current positivist and bio-medical orientation of the curriculum.

Preliminary thoughts on what has been uncovered through the attempts to establish a database of courses are that despite the potential for issues of gender and sexualities to inform a very broad range of curricula, the Internet and handbook search suggest that it is the rare department in which this is happening. Except for the trans-disciplinary sites of gender/women's studies, and isolated courses in social anthropology, community health, education and psychology, the audit did not suggest a rich reservoir of theory, knowledge and applied research informing the core curricula of South African undergraduate and graduate students on questions of gender and sexualities as a matter of *social and political literacy*.

### **Moving beyond a mapping**

As already noted, the methodology we used to initiate our exploration of how South African students at universities were “being taught” about gender and sexualities could offer only a very broad sketch of pedagogic opportunities, challenges, paradigms, and philosophies at play. In order to approach the project with more depth, the research team moved from engagement with websites and handbooks into a much richer set of data, conversations with faculty who were actually teaching, from different perspectives, courses on “gender and sexualities”. We used a number of different methods here: interviews, the development of in-depth autobiographical pieces of pedagogies in practice, analysis of syllabi, and a small national workshop in which sixteen teaching faculty came together for two days of intensive discussion on the pedagogies of gender and sexualities in the contemporary South African context. Here we offer some of the key observations, taken from our analysis of nineteen interviews with teaching faculty in eight different universities and seven broad disciplines: education, law, health sciences, social sciences, arts, and commerce (only one interviewee came from commerce, at Rhodes University, where she was teaching a course on sexuality and organisation).

Regardless of discipline, the complexity of “teaching sexualities and gender” was a live thread within all interviews. This related directly to the prevalence of HIV and AIDS in the country, and to the prevalence of “culture” as a term through which to negotiate the right to speak on questions of gender and sexuality. National political debates concerning questions of policy and treatment create discourses in which teachers and researchers operate within pre-scripted territory. To advocate the importance of considering poverty when understanding transmission is sometimes to be automatically aligned with an AIDS-denialist discourse. To stress the importance of good nutrition risks arousing the ire of some radical – and vitally important – civil activists. So teaching “sexualities” in contemporary SA is to teach “HIV and AIDS”, and to be interpellated into constraining political discourses.

Where faculty were taking the politics of gender seriously in the construction of sexualities, this was often because they were self-identified as feminists, or explained that they were “interested” in feminism. This did not always mean that they taught in G/WS (there were only two G/WS-based interviewees); it meant that they were located in personal and professional relationships to political activism concerning issues of reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, the rights of lesbian and gay people, access to political and educational space for women, and other issues. Such locations were often rooted in years of work, outside the academy, and meant that they were attuned to theories about patriarchal, capitalist, and/or colonial deployment of sexual politics in the control of “women’s” bodies and lives. Half of the interviewees did not see a need to concentrate on the dynamics of gender as a prerequisite for understanding the operation of sexualities.

Although three of the six faculty in the health sciences had academic and personal histories of feminist and social activism, four of them approached the teaching of sexualities primarily from within a bio-medical model. Emphasis was laid on the anatomical and biochemical construction of the body, the implications of such design for vulnerability to illness or “dysfunction”, the need to think through access to treatment, and the integration of “sexual health” into overall well-being. These faculty all acknowledged that questions of sexual pleasure, sexual orientation, desire, and identities rarely figured within their curricula.

Of the 19 interviewees, 16 were explicit about their levels of overload as teachers, and discussed the implications of this overload for their research (and in some cases, their social activism outside the university). Depending on

disciplines, classes were felt to be “packed”, “very demanding”, “exhausting”, and regardless of their commitment to teaching, students were described as “very under-prepared”, “struggling to cope”, “needing more attention than I can give”. This impression was not related to their sexualities and gender curricula; it was an overarching response to teaching environments in which there are often more students in a class than can be accommodated by the lecture-room, some of whom have had poor or mediocre secondary school education, and many of whom are working academically in English as a second language. The comments on overload also hint at the stress of their institutions themselves; many battle with under-resourcing, an increasingly managerialist approach to teaching (counting “throughput” and “intake” as matters of subsidy, rather than education), and difficult political contexts.

There were radical differences of approach to “sexualities” based on discipline alone. The bio-medical/social constructivist split was only one among several (although it is perhaps the most influential). Social anthropologists spoke of approaching sexualities through theories on networking and the symbolic salience of body-fluidities; cultural critics spoke of identities as a primary lens; sociologists focused on intersections between class construction, transaction, and the politics of labour and human migration. The single law professor interviewed approaches sexualities through international frameworks on human rights, and national debates on customary and constitutional law (e.g. debates on marriage and inheritance laws). Within each of these approaches, different canons of authority preside (those who assign Mary Douglas do not assign Foucault; those who assign Jessica Benjamin do not assign Sonia Correa; those who assign Diwan and Thorson (on sex, gender and tuberculosis in *The Lancet*) do not assign Denis Altman; those who assign Sylvia Tamale or Amina Mama do not assign Mary Douglas). This struck us as both inevitable, given disciplinary divides and priorities, but simultaneously alarming.

There are widely differing relationships to “Northern/Western” and to “African and South African” debates within curricular design. While a minority develop curricula drawing on indigenous research on sexualities and gender (including material developed through NGOs), and contextualised within continental debates, the majority demand that students locate themselves primarily within Northern/Western literature on sexualities and gender, within their discipline.

It remains true that most university curricula in South Africa are dominated by texts from the US, Europe, or (occasionally) Australia. Interviews with

faculty about the priorities they select for organising curricula confirmed this – in only five cases was it said that, “A priority is to introduce students to writing from South Africa, or from southern Africa, about these issues. I think it’s crucial for students to read this material, to show them that the authorities can emerge from here.”

Most of the interviewees were explicit about the importance of teaching sexualities (despite the range of meanings this had), and many connected this priority to the national context, and to the daily challenges faced by themselves and students alike. These challenges were clearly named: HIV and AIDS (deaths in families, the need to take care of orphaned family members, the need to access ARVs, the difficulties of creating sexual pleasure and experimentation in a climate where transmission of HIV is high); the profile of fundamentalist and conservative scripts for femininity and masculinity; the prevalence of gender-based violence; the diversity of people on campuses (many different cultural beliefs, values, and histories are required to cohere in classrooms and beyond); homophobia and racism.

The most difficult part of the interviews came from questions which explored the impact faculty teachers believed their courses had upon their students; this was something developed more intensively within the national workshop and the autobiographical excursions into the politics of pedagogy. Interviewees were all asked to reflect upon the challenges faced by their students, and to think about the meaning of “what has worked” in their classrooms. For many interviewees, regardless of discipline, faculty, or university, this released a flood of concern. One said:

I am never sure what works. I don’t know what they hear, that they can apply to their own lives, even when they can write sophisticated essays, which is rare, I must say, the theories stay in their heads. Every week, one of them is outside my door, wanting advice about an STI, a relationship, needing to explain about why they don’t really like gay people. I’m not one of those department softies, you know, I’m not a mother figure. But they come and ask. And it’s as though what we’ve discussed in class has not touched sides.

In this interview, the interviewer points out that perhaps the topics on the student’s mind have been stimulated by readings on homosexuality or the networks through which viruses are transmitted. The interviewee (a lecturer in Social Development) shook her head: “No, I don’t buy it. I can feel the disconnect.”

Other interviewees recounted more positive impressions of the power of bringing gender and sexualities into students' intellectual paths, through different disciplines: public health, law, arts. Nonetheless, throughout the interviews, there is a sense of “spitting into the wind,” of teaching vital ideas and materials into a context in which realities of political, social, and cultural difficulties render critical gender analysis of sexualities very challenging. Interviewees spoke movingly of students who would not take ARVs (and died), students who delivered babies in residences (for fear of getting help from friends and university health services), of students asking for AZT the morning after a sexual liaison, fearing HIV transmission but having been too scared to demand condom usage the night before.

## Conclusion

There are diverse courses on South African university campuses that take gender and sexualities seriously, and this is, we believe, a relatively recent phenomenon. However, these are overwhelmingly located in the humanities and the health sciences, and in neither sphere do they constitute a primary zone of curricular emphasis for students. With the exception of material presented in obstetrics/gynaecology, nursing and community medicine, material on reproduction is not a core part of the curriculum, and is presented within a bio-medical model. A strong emphasis on HIV as “sexual risk” does help to develop another angle to the need for “sexualities education”, but again, this is not generally approached as a non-medicalised area. Most other courses in which it is possible to see the presence of gender and sexualities issues from the course outline are elective courses, rarely taken within a cumulatively developed suite of curricula. There are also major areas of university education in which issues of gender or sexualities do not arise as curricular concerns.

It is undeniable that the national context creates powerful dilemmas for both faculty and students. Faculty perspectives on gender and sexualities teaching indicate that while such teaching does indeed offer a route into potentially transformative learning for students, this route is compromised by the general academic environment, but more seriously, by the intransigence of the idea that “academic theory/writing” is fundamentally separable from “ways of living your life”. Even in disciplines committed to the presence of “the body” (through diverse, even contradictory, routes), the role of the university as a route into “professionalisation” trumps – or challenges – efforts to radicalise consciousness at every level. Individual faculty are often

dedicated to interacting with these challenges, and do so with innovation, political courage, and theoretical clarity. The impact of this dedication may well be felt at the level of a single course; it is unlikely to translate into a more widespread influence.

As researchers whose engagement with teaching has long formed a core thread of our own political engagement with the world, this project has raised a number of questions. It is clear that there is an urgent need for the “reconciliation” of social and medical Sciences not simply at the level of research methodologies, prestige, and so on, but in terms of how some young men and women (who may remain HIV-negative, experience huge sexual pleasure and joy in their lives, and give birth to happy and healthy babies) deserve “education”. It is equally clear that G/WS initiatives, brave as they are, are insufficient as “thin ends of the wedge” in terms of transforming pedagogic cultures with university teaching which can genuinely educate for a future in which young professionals, with university degrees, can be expected to fully engage notions of “sexual rights” or “sexual health” from a well-informed perspective.

Finally, it is also critical that concern with the actual practices of teaching – moving from offering a course to the more complex work of actually designing and effectively delivering that course (something not addressed in this article) – remains as much a focus of critical institutional transformation and research as any other area. There are always students who yawn, or doodle, or daydream about prospective lovers at the back of the lecture theatre. To be “out of touch” with our students’ lives, thoughts, and anxieties, however, will not simply render us irrelevant in a way we may not have been before. It would also leave those young men and women who do transcend the challenges of the current epidemics of HIV, gender-based violence, sex negativities and conservatisms, unable to push forward ideas about sexual rights or feminist democracy with the necessary critical intelligence. Such irresponsibility would also damage students’ vision of the global solidarities and alliances they need in order to make sense of currently constrained and painful political debates on sexual and reproductive health. As South African university teachers, we believe we have a powerful and challenging task ahead.

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## Endnotes

- 1 AMPS figures for annual circulation of *Drum* magazine in 2006 are 1 300 000.
- 2 See, for example, Clowes, 2001: 1-20.
- 3 The talented and popular Leremi was killed in a car accident in September 2007.
- 4 The South African Department of Health seroprevalence study of 2006 estimated that 39.1% of mothers attending antenatal clinics were HIV-positive; the National AIDS Study of the year before (2005) put KwaZulu-Natal's overall seroprevalence at 16%, higher than any other province.
- 5 Such as the AIDS and Society Research Unit, at the University of Cape Town, headed by Professor Nicoli Nattrass, and the Health Economics and HIV/AIDS Research Division at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Treatment Action Campaign, as an activist NGO, has branches on several South African university campuses.
- 6 This is said by Mandisa Cakawe, a researcher attached to Amajuba Child Health and Wellbeing Research Project in Newcastle, in *Drum*, 20 September 2007: 11.
- 7 We are thinking here of the work of Rainbo; the African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre; the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), Sister Namibia, the African Gender Institute, the Law, Gender and Sexuality Project at the University of Makerere, the Coalition of African Lesbians, and many others.
- 8 See, for example, Pattman and Chege, 2003: 103-112.

- 9 Lindiwe Bardill, at the African Gender Institute, worked as a research assistant on this wing of the project, and offered many important contributions and insights to the “mapping” process.
- 10 Unless psychology was housed within the Health Sciences (as it is at the University of the Western Cape, for example).
- 11 There are innovations here; there is a graduate law course in Sexual and Reproductive Rights newly offered at the University of the Free State. It is funded by the Ford Foundation, and pioneered by key faculty in the law faculty there. Similar shifts, where one faculty member is creating innovation in a conservative disciplinary space, can be found in other university sites across the country.
- 12 There are some degree programmes that merge courses from different disciplines (e.g. community health, the sociology of health) with medical courses on sexual reproduction and health, so that a more holistic approach to sexuality and health, which includes an analysis of gender, is generated. This was observed in some nursing programmes (at UWC in particular), where, for example, courses such as reproductive health, which take a bio-medical approach to sexuality, are integrated with courses that add insight into the social context of health and disease.

# Challenging gender inequality in higher education: Attitudes and perceptions of teaching staff and administrators at the University of Buea, Cameroon

Joyce B. Mbongo Endeley and Margaret Nchang Ngaling

## Introduction

It has been noted that “the provision of a safe and inclusive environment is the responsibility of the university in order to allow all to achieve their potential” (FAWE, 1998: 6). This paper inquires into the challenges of building a gender-responsive culture in higher education institutions, using the University of Buea (UB) as a case study.

## The University of Buea

UB is one of six state universities in Cameroon and the only one that uses English as the principal medium of teaching and learning. It is located in the South West Province, one of two provinces with an Anglo-Saxon culture. UB is situated in Molyko quarter of Buea town, the provincial headquarters of the province. In 1993, UB was transformed from a “University Centre of Translators and Interpreters” into a fully-fledged university. In 2002, when our research was performed, UB had five faculties offering approximately 58 degree programmes in arts, education, health sciences, sciences, social and management sciences and the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI). Since 2002, several new programmes have been created, including a degree programme in medicine, which became operational in the 2006/7 academic year. Though the population of teaching staff has stagnated over the years, this is not the case for the student population, which has increased by about 63%, from 6 519 to 10 203 students.

It is worth noting that UB registered a higher female than male population – 5 202 females and 5 001 males. The classic disparity by gender in the

population of teaching staff in tertiary educational institutions, with women as a minority, is to be observed in UB.

Table 1: Distribution of the University of Buea teaching staff by gender, rank and year (2002 and 2007)

Rank of teachers	2002				Total		2007				Total	
	Male		Female				Male		Female			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Professor	6	2.6	2	0.9	8	3.5	12	5.0	1	0.4	13	5.4
Assistant Professor	11	4.9	2	0.9	13	5.8	9	3.7	4	1.7	13	5.4
Lecturer	44	19.5	8	3.5	52	23	91	37.6	17	7.0	108	44.6
Assistant Lecturer	107	47.3	40	17.7	147	65	56	23.1	29	12	85	35.1
Instructor	5	2.2	1	0.4	6	2.6	17	7.0	6	2.5	23	9.5
Total	173	76.6	53	23.4	226	100	185	76.4	57	23.6	242	100

Analysis of the academic rank of teachers revealed that over the years both male and female teachers have improved their academic rank, even though men dominate at all ranks, particularly that of professor (Table 1). With regard to highest educational qualification, 43,2% were holders of the doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree, 51,7% had a master’s degree and 5% had the *doctorat de troisième cycle* (equivalent to a master of philosophy). While in 2002, at the time of the study, the majority of the teaching staff did not have a terminal degree, this percentage is currently on the decline due to staff development and a higher education policy to give employment priority to holders of PhDs.<sup>1</sup>

UB remains unique among universities in Cameroon as it is the only one to offer (and train students in) the discipline of Women and Gender Studies. So what has ensued from this uniqueness?

This study expands on the work of Endeley and Ardener (2004) and Endeley (2004), and makes a first attempt at examining if the creation of a Department of Women and Gender Studies, having had a female vice-chancellor, and government endorsement of gender equality and the promotion of women’s advancement in society, is making any difference in the gendered culture at UB. The creation of institutions to promote feminist/gender/women’s scholarship does not suffice, of course, to create a gender-

responsive culture, so this paper examines other elements needed to build such a culture.

A more truly gender-responsive culture would be characterised by gender equity in access, redressing structural barriers that influence the access and participation of both sexes, and women's active role in decision-making in the management and administration of higher education (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999:10). We must also find strategies to consolidate gains achieved by institutions in the promotion of gender-responsive practices on campus.

That said, we have chosen not to document the existence of gender policies and practices at UB, but to interrogate the disposition and attitudes of teaching and administrative staff to the concept of feminism, indicators that denote gender-responsive practices. We also attempt a classification of UB gender practices within a conceptual framework of gender culture. Our approach is based on the presumption that feminism is a discourse, therefore we have to understand what sense teachers and senior administrators make of the concept and other feminist/gender actions and practices. Do they have a positive disposition and attitude to engendering knowledge and life on campus? Are they willing to assume responsibility for, support and participate in actions that build a gender-responsive culture?

Specifically, we examined the attitudes and perceptions of the teaching staff, who often double as administrators, in relation to practices of a gender-inclusive culture. We probed lecturers' comprehension and receptivity to key feminist concepts in order to describe their attitudes and disposition to variables that denote and promote a gender-inclusive culture. The paper also analyses current actions by UB, including the Department of Women and Gender Studies, towards building a gender-responsive campus.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of this study arises from the need to assess and address gender issues on campus. These include sexual harassment, violence against girls and female teachers, unhealthy relationships between teachers and students, inequality in the number of women vis-à-vis men in senior management positions and higher academic ranks. We chart a way for the Department of Women and Gender Studies on the UB campus to step up feminist activism (and gender consciousness-raising). It is hoped that the paper will throw more light on how the UB administration has addressed women's and gender concerns, issues and the engendering of knowledge.

## Literature review and conceptual framework

The situation of women vis-à-vis men, particularly in universities in Africa, is inseparable from women's position in society at large. Kyomuhendo (2001: 1) notes that women's role and progress in the university can only be understood through an analysis of the sociology that situates the university in the society and defines its existence, goals and values. If universities, by virtue of the great role they play in the production of knowledge and research, still to a large extent perpetuate gender bias, then there is a need to examine the systems, structures, norms and values of society that govern and define the universities and their ways of operation, which are significantly patriarchal.

Ironically, Unesco (1998a: 2) argues that today, although there are no formal obstacles preventing women from reaching high positions in colleges and universities, men still dominate at all levels of influence. The document gives the example of Sweden, regarded as one of the most advanced countries in respect of gender equality; yet in 1994, 93% of the professors in Swedish colleges and universities were men. This, despite the fact that women have been admitted to higher education in Sweden for 120 years, and more than 60% of Swedish university students are women.

Stating the importance of engendering education, Jackson (1997: 466) notes that an educational theory which fails to take into account feminist critiques and gender analysis is doing a disservice to both men and women by not considering the ways in which existing pedagogies can be enriched. Jackson (1997: 458) argues for the possibility of inculcating a feminist pedagogy. She makes reference to the views of Welch (1994), Weiner (1994), and Weiler (1991), who posit that feminist pedagogy is based on three principles: to strive for egalitarian relationships in the classroom; to try to make all students feel valued as individuals; and to use the experience of students as a learning resource in order to bring about social transformation.

Does UB promote these values?

Our research is based on a conceptual framework developed by the authors that brings together practical and development principles. The following nine indicators were identified as important indicators of the existence of a gender-inclusive culture:<sup>3</sup>

- Support for interventions or actions that will reduce female students' and women's overall labour; for example, the provision of crèches (day nurseries) on campus, and a subsidised nursery school to encourage the investment of more time in academics;

- The identification of appropriate targets, indicators, time frames, and monitoring and evaluation strategies sensitive enough to promote the advancement of women in higher education;
- Support for the use of gender-sensitive language in all oral and written communication, for example he/she; chairperson instead of chairman etc;
- Advocacy for pedagogic training in order to mainstream gender in all the courses in the existing faculties and schools in higher education;
- Encouragement of punishment for persons guilty of sexual harassment;<sup>4</sup>
- Encouragement of research on the level of sexual harassment on campus, its impact on both men and women, and how it can be addressed and redressed.
- Support for a gendered perspective to be considered in research proposals; that is, research should focus on how both women and men are affected by societal change, technological development or other phenomena under study;
- Organisation of seminars/workshops to encourage academics (women and men) to share household management and childrearing, in order to give women enough time to pursue academic careers;
- Advocating that the state provide grants and other resources to support men and women who opt to pursue academic careers. This is because many persons in the domain of higher education do not attain their academic goals due to financial and other material constraints.

These nine indicators were then grouped into the following larger principles: empowerment, co-operation, equity, sustainability and security:<sup>5</sup>

- **Empowerment:** having control or gaining further control over oneself; having a say and being listened to; and being able to influence social choices and decisions within one's environment;
- **Co-operation:** the ability of women to gain the support of men in their day-to-day activities;
- **Equity:** "fairness", "justice" and comparable access to all spheres of the higher education system for men and women;
- **Sustainability:** means that women and men in the realm of higher education should, at present and in the future, be able to work together peacefully, with respect given to everybody's rights;
- **Security:** establishing rules and regulations governing the rights of women and men, especially in relation to sexual harassment.

**Table 2: Conceptual framework on gender-inclusive culture: Principles and indicators**

Principle for fostering a gender-inclusive culture	Gender-inclusive indicators
<b>Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for interventions that reduce female students' and women's labour in order that more time can be invested in academic work.</li> <li>• Support for a gender perspective being considered in research proposals.</li> <li>• Support for appropriate targets, indicators, time frames and monitoring and evaluation strategies that are sensitive to promoting the advancement of women.</li> </ul>
<b>Co-operation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for women and men sharing household management and childrearing in order that women have enough time to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>
<b>Equity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for the use of gender-sensitive language in all oral and written communication, for example he/she; chairperson instead of chairman etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy for pedagogic training in order to mainstream gender in all the courses in the existing faculties and schools in higher education.</li> <li>• Advocacy for the state to provide grants and other resources to support men and women who opt to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>
<b>Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging the punishment of persons guilty of sexual harassment.</li> <li>• Encouraging research on the level of sexual harassment on campus, its impact on both men and women and how it can be redressed.</li> </ul>

An analysis of the actions used by UB to foster a gender-inclusive culture vis-à-vis this conceptual framework and of teachers' attitudes towards a gender-inclusive culture will be given in greater detail below.

## Methodology

Primary data via a questionnaire was gathered from 185 teachers, from a target population of 226 teachers, in 2002. Teachers from the Department of Women and Gender Studies were interviewed. Most of the UB teaching staff (26,5%) had been teaching at the University of Buea for eight years or more. About twenty-four per cent (23,9%) had been teaching for six to seven years, 17,1% for four to five years, 24,8% for two to three years and 7,7% for less than one year. The data indicate that a majority (at least 50,4%) of the teachers were no strangers to the UB environment.

Secondary data was gathered from university records, and other literature was reviewed on related themes of the study. This being a descriptive research survey, both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were employed. The research instruments examined lecturers' understandings of the concept of feminism; their receptivity to feminism; the place of feminism in the Cameroon context; feminism as a subject in academia; alternatives to the concept of feminism; and lecturers' disposition to the stance, measures and actions of feminism that constitute and foster a gender-inclusive culture.

### **Brief overview of UB's effort to integrate and address gender concerns in management and campus**

What measures have been put in place to close the gender gap at UB?

A distinctive aspect that set the University of Buea apart from other universities in Cameroon for many years is that it had a female vice-chancellor, from its inception in 1993 until 2005, in the person of Dr Dorothy Limunga Njeuma. Her leadership style has been described as "being essentially interactive, but mixed with some traits of command-and-control and transformative feminist models."<sup>6</sup> These authors have attributed UB's progress in the promotion of gender equality, equity and gender-friendly actions to the positive disposition she had on the subject as a gender-sensitive person. UB has since become a leader in gender parity in student enrolment and performance, and UB has more women in senior level management than other universities in Cameroon and many other African countries (*UB Standard*, 2002: 3).

Understanding the benefits to be derived through collective empowerment and sisterhood, Dr Njeuma encouraged the formation of an organisation called the Forum for the Professionalisation of the Woman (FOPROW-UB) (*The BUN* 2001: 30). It was hoped that this association would encourage the professionalisation of female staff and students alike, and help them to participate in building a comfortable work and learning environment by paying particular attention to women's practical and strategic needs. Unfortunately, despite its great ambition, FOPROW-UB's effective existence was short-lived. When in 2005 Dr Njeuma moved on to become the vice-chancellor of Cameroon's first and most populous state university, differences of class, rank, aspirations, needs and vision among the women in the association overwhelmed the movement for sisterhood. Yet, despite the demise of FOPROW-UB, a tradition of collective empowerment remains central in how women progress in the university circles.

In addition, the combination of a gender-aware leadership and a Department of Women and Gender Studies (WGS) is definitely a plus for UB. These factors not only create an enabling environment but have made available people with knowledge and skills in gender who are able to assist management and the larger public in mainstreaming gender. The UB culture continues to informally promote gender equality, building from the foundation that was laid from 1993. Endeley, Ardener, Goodridge, and Lyonga (2004: 71-72) affirm that the presence of the Department of Women and Gender Studies has influenced the promotion of gender awareness in academics. In the basic day-to-day management of the university, gender concerns everyone. UB never loses sight of an opportunity during gatherings such as matriculation, convocation, Women's Day or African University Day to raise issues of gender inequality and women's oppression and subordination; women are encouraged to be assertive, to succeed and refrain from perpetuating the stereotyping of women as sex objects.

Recently, the university senate revisited the issue of sexual harassment on campus and resolved to set up a committee to study the situation and to report to the vice-chancellor with recommendations. It is worth noting, however, that the current vice-chancellor is male – Professor Vincent Titanji. The committee is headed by a female gender-sensitive professor and other staff who are lawyers, feminist activists, educationalists and guidance counsellors. Without any doubt, UB is ahead of other universities in Cameroon in safeguarding practices towards building a gender-inclusive culture in the university campus and management, but do these measures suffice? UB has no gender policy or plan of action, which Endeley and Ardener (2004) note is a major weakness in UB's approach to gender mainstreaming.

### **The meaning teachers give to the concept of feminism**

In this section, we shall focus on the meaning teachers give to the concept of feminism. Asked what they understand by "feminism", the largest proportion, almost a third of the teachers (31,6%) perceived feminism as "recognition of women's rights, equal to those of men". More than a quarter (29,1%) associated the concept with "women-related issues and opinions"; 18,8% considered feminism to be "action against gender inequality and oppression of women"; 11,1% saw it as "movement towards women's emancipation and empowerment"; 4,3% considered it to be "a concept relating to gender consciousness"; 3,4% believed it means having "strong feelings of belonging to the weaker sex", and 1,7% reported that it is "a recognition that women occupy a subordinate position."

Most of the reported responses are valid perspectives on feminism and do not contradict current feminist stances/arguments. Therefore, we can logically conclude that teachers have a fair understanding of the meaning of the concept of feminism, even if the depth and scope of understanding remains shallow. For example, associating feminism with “strong feelings of belonging to the weaker sex” as reported by 3,4% of the respondents, is restrictive. The phrase has a patriarchal undertone and seemingly connotes feminism as private and not public politics; the affair of the weaker sex, habitually associated with the female sex. The next section delves into greater depth and scope on teachers’ comprehension of the concept, by asking, are teachers receptive to the concept of feminism?

### **Receptivity to feminism and feminist practices and actions**

By querying receptivity to feminism, we attempt to probe deeper into teachers’ opinions and attitudes about the place of feminism in the Cameroon context and academia, and their willingness to support measures and participate in actions against gender discrimination and inequality, and to foster a gender-friendly culture on campus.

#### *The place of feminism in the Cameroon context*

Our attempt to determine whether feminism has a place in Cameroon society was very encouraging. The majority (about 80%) of the teachers agreed with the statement that feminism should be promoted in Cameroon for these reasons: women should have the chance to exercise their talents and reduce poverty; gender inequality and discrimination exists in Cameroon; fostering gender equality in development is a concern for women and men; women have excelled in all domains of life; women have greatly contributed to development; and women constitute more than 50% of the workforce. More explicitly, some teachers reported that “feminism would bring women’s problems to the limelight” and “feminism is part of African thought and practice”. These responses reveal a positive disposition, which if exploited is likely to ease the incorporation of gender-aware policy and enhance UB’s effort in mainstreaming gender in the management and administration of the university. It is also clear that teachers do recognise women as well as men as development actors who are constrained in different and often unequal ways as participants in and beneficiaries of development.

In contrast, one fifth of the teachers (20%) said feminism has no place in Cameroon. These respondents hold the following opinions: “feminism gives

the wrong impression that women have been discriminated against” (6%); “feminism has no place in the African context” (3,4%); “it has created a lot of conflict, especially in marital relations” (3,4%); “it does not give room for appropriate competition between the sexes” (3,4%); “it is a reaction against established structures, thus importing Western values” (1,7%); “it is often misunderstood by women as liberty to misbehave” (1,7%); and “women have always been naturally protected by men” (0,9%).

These responses illustrate that some teachers are in complete denial of the existence of gender inequality and unequal power relations by gender, class and ethnicity. This is not atypical but reflective of societal opinions about women’s quest for gender equality, empowerment and advancement in Cameroon and other societies, especially in Africa and other developing countries. Yet gender inequality is recognised and publicly challenged by the government of Cameroon, civil society, professional groups and the population at large. The fact that 20% of the teaching core continued to display this sort of negative attitude towards feminism is worrisome because of the roles these teachers are expected to play in human resource development. How then are men and women portrayed in the subjects taught by this group of teachers?

### *Feminism as an academic subject*

Did UB teachers consider feminism to be important as a programme in higher education? Most of the teachers (78,8%) supported the idea, while 21,2% were against it. The former said feminism would strengthen academic institutions to address gender issues (13,6%); feminism would help women to know their rights (13,6%); feminist ideas would act as a booster for theories to be put into practice (12%); and a small number of teachers (10,3%) believe that since it is a political ideology, there is a need to study and analyse its content. These responses indicate that despite the absence of a clearly spelt-out policy on gender at the University of Buea, a good number of the teachers were aware of the contribution and benefits which feminism could bring to knowledge development and to portraying the realities of women’s and men’s lives in higher education and society at large.

The discussions so far echo the views of Jackson (1997: 466) who is of the opinion that an educational theory that fails to take feminist critiques and gender analyses into account is doing a disservice to both women and men by failing to consider ways in which existing pedagogies can be enriched.

The author notes that even though universities are in the realms of research and knowledge production, they are still significantly influenced by the patriarchal systems, structures, norms and values of society.

Conversely, 13,6% of the teachers were against the inclusion and teaching of feminism in academia. Some said “feminism does not deserve much attention” (8,5%); others think teaching feminism is a means by which “women want to override and control men” (3,4 %.); while still others believe that feminism in academia would disrupt its culture. These are commonly mentioned fears and reasons why men and patriarchy are resistant to feminist activism. In addition to biological determinism, Mukhopadhyay (1995, in IDS 1996: 9) notes that the “sanctity of culture” is often invoked as an excuse for resisting any attempt to rethink and challenge gender inequalities.

### *Teachers’ willingness to support networks for women on campus*

Receptivity to feminism demands willingness to support feminist activism, as well as networks. Are UB teachers willing to do so? When asked if respondents would participate in the development of strong support networks for women on campus (an aspect of feminism), the majority (about 63%) responded in the affirmative: they would participate, especially as support networks are perceived by respondents as forums for exchanging knowledge, healthy for university campus life, and a means of helping women become more active, especially in their professional careers. Others say such support networks are justifiable because women are an integral category of life on campus.

In opposition, a sizeable proportion, more than a third of the teachers (about 37%), said they would not support the development of networks for women on campus. Reasons given included: support networks for women are not necessary; time is a constraint; they have no interest in women’s networks; support networks are for women only; women on campus are not part of the vulnerable group; the African society has always honoured women as mothers, contrary to what many people think; and there are women’s networks on campus already. While none of the respective percentages of these responses exceeded 11%, these responses reflect some of the well-established forms of covert bureaucratic resistance usually observed at institutional levels (Unicef, 1994). When some of the teachers (10,6%), for example, stated, “support networks for women are not necessary”, claiming that women already have equality of opportunity and the problem is merely to encourage women to take advantage of the opportunities given to them, it clearly illustrates denial

of the existence of a gender gap, gender issues and discrimination against women. Differences in staff ranking and other gender issues such as sexual harassment and gender violence justify supporting feminist networks on campus. No country in the world can boast of real parity in opportunities or truly equal status between men and women. It would seem this category of teachers did not want women to consolidate their efforts to challenge the hegemonic status quo on campus and in society at large.

A genuine constraint to supporting women's networks on campus, especially in the academic cycle, is the fact that UB faces a shortage of teaching staff, and female teachers in particular are constrained by their triple role. Nevertheless, some use time as an excuse and a polite way of not getting involved in feminist debates. Further investigation is needed to prove that this is not an act of shelving, a more honest overt and detectable form of delay in effecting change or challenging institutional policy, principles or goals to bring about gender equality.

### *Concept of feminism – is there a substitute?*

This discussion looks into the fact that feminism is a discourse. As a discourse, feminism, whether in terms of its appellation, origin or construct, remains very unsettled. Its visibility is often denied in many traditional, cultural and patriarchal contexts, even when it is apparent. What do teachers at the tertiary level of education, who constitute the core of scholarship, think? In pointing out the contempt for feminism, Ogunyemi (1996:122) notes that the "masculinist" critic dismisses the woman who criticises society as "Woman Palava" (troublemaker) because she is making visible that (the woman) which was invisible; expressing the pain that was swallowed in silence; imbuing with pride that which is female and therefore considered contemptible. It is from this perspective that the teachers in this study were asked if there are preferred alternatives to the concept of feminism.

The word feminism often connotes resentment, fear and worry in many people, especially men. It is dreaded by those who benefit from unequal power relations, but it can be acceptable to groups that suffer from subordination, oppression, discrimination and inequality. Even then, it is not unusual for those who support feminism to suggest a different appellation to feminist ideologies, principles and practices. In the case of teachers in UB, slightly more than two-thirds (68,1%) of the teachers said there was no alternative to the concept of feminism. The rest (about 32%) thought that there were other names that could be used; suggestions included social studies; peaceful co-existence of

humankind; gender studies; humanity; family life education; studies on the evolution of women and men in society; and male adjustments to the new requirements of a balanced society. We note that with the exception of “gender studies,” the other labels are gender neutral, if not anti-feminist in nature. At face value the labels do not enforce engagement in women’s advancement and feminist activism. For example, appellations such as “peaceful co-existence” and “social studies” are too broad and subsuming to do justice to feminist thoughts, stance, goals, principles, approaches and methods.

### **Teachers’ disposition to actions aimed at promoting gender responsiveness at UB**

This section describes teachers’ ability to identify elements that depict a gender-responsive culture on campus, state the advantages and disadvantages of a gender-inclusive culture, and identify the beneficiaries of such a strategy.

Given several decisions, rules and regulations, and actions by management, are teachers able to determine those that foster gender responsiveness? About three-quarters of the teachers (74,8%) affirmed that they were able to identify actions that could promote gender-responsive culture on campus, while 25,2% could not. The largest proportion of the lecturers, about 45%, cited the efforts aimed at attaining gender parity in students’ enrolment in some disciplines and the increasing proportion of female students. Other examples mentioned include: efforts in having women occupy top and senior administrative positions. They also mentioned the fact that the vice-chancellor was a woman and that some directors, deans, vice-deans, and heads of department were women. The existence of the Forum for the Professionalisation of the Woman (FOPROW-UB), the encouragement of girls/women in particular in science and academic excellence through prize awards and scholarships, and the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies were also mentioned.

Asked if there were any advantages in pursuing a gender-inclusive culture on campus, the responses were positive. The teachers cited a variety of advantages. The most frequent response was the statement that a gender-inclusive practice would encourage a conducive learning environment for all – both females and males (42,7%). It was also alleged that a gender-inclusive culture creates a more amicable and stable society; helps women become more confident; develops a greater sense of co-operation between women and men; creates equal opportunity for all; reduces discrimination against women; and enlightens the public about gender issues.

The teachers were also asked to give their opinion on whether there are any disadvantages in promoting a gender-inclusive culture. Slightly over half of them (52,5%) upheld the view that there are no disadvantages. This finding corroborates the positive impression of feminism held by most teachers. By implication, we can assume that the teachers are generally aware of the importance and benefit that can follow from a gender-responsive system to life on campus and its people – women/men and girls/boys. Most (about 70%) of the teachers said everybody – teachers, non-teachers, students and others – could be beneficiaries of this culture.

Nevertheless, a few teachers (the highest proportion being 17%) believe that it might lead to conflicts between women and men, since the practice of a gender-inclusive culture challenges male hegemony, patriarchy, women's subordination and discrimination. Others expressed fears and worries; they said measures aimed at promoting a gender-responsive culture would not give room for fair competition between the sexes, might encourage women to neglect their "traditional" roles, might exclude men completely and cause resistance to change, might intensify the envious nature of women against other women and might lead to the loss of some good cultural habits and traits. An insignificant percentage (4,3%) of teachers think nobody would benefit; whereas 2,5% are unable to determine who could benefit from the promotion of a gender-inclusive culture.

### **An assessment of UB actions vis-à-vis the indicators of gender-inclusive culture**

The discussion in this section attempts to assess the actions of the University of Buea in relation to the indicators and principles (empowerment, co-operation, equity, sustainability and security) that we identified earlier as defining a gender-inclusive culture. The pertinent question is whether UB's actions conform with elements in the conceptual framework chosen for this study. This is followed by an analysis of teachers' attitudes to the nine indicators defining a gender-inclusive culture.

It is quite clear that UB is implementing activities that denote a gender-inclusive culture in the domains of empowerment, equity and security, and these are outlined below. We were unable to locate actions that fall in the areas of co-operation and sustainability.

## *Empowerment*

There are measures in place to encourage the enrolment of female students into male-dominated disciplines such as physics, mathematics and computer science. One of the goals stated in the *University of Buea Strategic Plan* (1998: 21) is the need to increase the number of female students in general and in the sciences in particular, especially in subjects such as physics, mathematics and computer science. *UB Standard* (2002: 8) reports that from 1993 to 2001, programmes such as educational foundations and administration, curriculum studies, English, English/French, journalism and mass communication, nursing, political science, sociology and anthropology, and women and gender studies were generally female-dominated. By contrast, physics, mathematics and computer science, accounting, banking and finance, chemistry, economics, environmental science, geography, geology, life sciences, management, medical laboratory sciences, history and law have been male-dominated. It is assumed that teachers' support for strategies that enable women and men to excel in any discipline of their choice means they will go the extra mile in taking the initiative to close the gender gap caused by discrimination and oppression or bias that act as barriers.

Table 3: Extent of UB's implementation of actions that promote gender-inclusive culture

Gender-inclusive culture – indicator	Level of implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for interventions that reduce female students' and women's labour in order for more time to be invested in academics.</li> </ul>	No action has been taken.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for a gender perspective to be considered in research proposals.</li> </ul>	No university policy that demands the gender consideration in all research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for appropriate targets, indicators, time frames and monitoring and evaluation strategies that are sensitive to promoting the advancement of women.</li> </ul>	Partial action, e.g. encouragement of female students in male-dominated disciplines, of more women in management and administrative positions, use of gender-disaggregated data in management of staff and student records as well as for making decisions concerning scholarship to female students, and respect for laws governing women's reproductive rights.

Gender-inclusive culture – indicator	Level of implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for women and men to take part in household management and childrearing in order for women to have enough time to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>	<p>Very little has been done.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for the use of gender-sensitive language in all oral and written communication, for example he/she; chairperson instead of chairman etc.</li> </ul>	<p>This measure is being carried out even though there is no formal policy.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy for pedagogic training in order to mainstream gender in all the courses in the existing faculties and schools in higher education.</li> </ul>	<p>Very little has been done.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy for the state to provide grants and other resources to support men and women who choose to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>	<p>This has been partially done.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encouraging the punishment of persons guilty of sexual harassment.</li> </ul>	<p>No action has been taken.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encouraging research on the level of sexual harassment on campus, its impact on both men and women and how it can be redressed.</li> </ul>	<p>This has recently been done.</p>

The *UB Standard* (2002: 3) reports that a relatively higher proportion of females in senior management positions (such as vice-chancellor [rector], deputy-vice chancellors, directors, deans, vice-deans, heads of department, faculty officers and chiefs of service) are found in the University of Buea than in other universities in Cameroon. The increase, in our opinion, is closely associated with the fact that in the past UB had a gender-sensitive leader who aspired to having competent men as well as women in decision-making positions.

### *Equity*

In the arena of equity, the university presents all relevant records using gender-disaggregated statistics so as to identify and address gender imbalance in all spheres. The *UB Standard* (2002: 5) magazine reports that a prominent place is given to gender-disaggregated data in most statistics and records that deal

with admission, enrolment, performance, staff, scholarship and other areas of interest at the University of Buea.

### *Security*

University management always frowns on and punishes perpetrators of sexual harassment, violence, battery and rape. Culprits, especially students, are dismissed and handed over to the police, or receive suspension from studies ranging from one semester to one academic year, depending on the gravity of the case.

While the punishment for students is well-defined, this is not the case for teaching staff. Yet teachers are major actors in exploiting students, especially female students. However, in August 2007 the senate demanded that a committee be set up to study and come up with proposals regarding the incidence of sexual harassment on campus. This committee has since become operational.

Analysis so far shows that UB is on track and has made substantial efforts to build a gender-inclusive culture on campus. However, it still has the daunting task of consolidating and institutionalising gender-sensitive measures in all five principles. Only then will gender-inclusive culture become a reality.

### **Teachers' attitudes towards indicators of gender-inclusive culture**

In general, regardless of gender, UB teachers had a positive attitude towards all attributes of gender-inclusive culture described in this paper. They agreed to encourage or support all nine actions listed in Table 3. Their levels of agreement are described in Table 4 below. Female teachers, understandably, strongly agreed to advocate pedagogic training that mainstreams gender in all courses in the existing faculties and schools in higher education institutes (3,52); that the state should provide grants and other resources to support men and women who opt to pursue academic careers (3,89); and that the punishment of persons guilty of sexual harassment should be encouraged (3,96). The strong feelings expressed by women reflect how much women suffer and would like to have lasting solutions to these debilitating gender issues. The findings thus far indicate that an enabling environment exists for management to create a gender policy and plan of action; these measures would help in the establishment of a gender-inclusive culture. It would become a reality and not a myth.

**Table 4: Analyses of teachers' attitudes towards a gender-inclusive culture, on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)**

Indicators	Female mean	Male mean
<b>Empowerment:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for interventions that reduce female students' and women's labour in order for more time to be invested in academics.</li> <li>Support for a gender perspective to be considered in research proposals.</li> <li>Support for appropriate targets, indicators, time frames and monitoring and evaluation strategies that are sensitive to promoting the advancement of women.</li> </ul>	3,29 3,28 3,12	3,05 3,14 3,00
<b>Co-operation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for women and men to take part in household management and childrearing in order for women to have enough time to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>	3,12	3,08
<b>Equity:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support for the use of gender-sensitive language in all oral and written communication, for example he/she; chairperson instead of chairman etc.</li> </ul>	3,14	2,87
<b>Sustainability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy of pedagogic training in order to mainstream gender in all the courses in the existing faculties and schools in higher education.</li> <li>Advocacy of the state providing grants and other resources to support men and women who opt to pursue academic careers.</li> </ul>	3,52 3,89	3,10 3,38
<b>Security:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encouraging the punishment of persons guilty of sexual harassment.</li> <li>Encouraging research on the level of sexual harassment on campus, its impact on both men and women and how it can be redressed.</li> </ul>	3,96 3,39	3,56 3,40

### A gender-inclusive culture at UB

Data from the study reveal that the majority of the teachers (81,4%) perceive feminism positively, and most of them (74,8%) could identify aspects of a gender-inclusive culture on campus. Through the conceptual framework, we also see that both management and teachers, irrespective of gender, favour and desire measures that promote a gender-inclusive culture. In addition, UB and its teachers also support the appointment of more qualified women

to key academic and administrative positions and the encouragement of enrolment of female students into male-dominated disciplines such as physics, mathematics and computer sciences. However, we hold that the positive perception of feminism and actions that depict a gender-inclusive culture on campus are insufficient to assert that there is the practice of a gender-inclusive culture at UB. To ensure sustainability, a culture of this nature needs the support of a formal gender policy. Unfortunately, there is no such policy at UB; none is in the pipeline; there is not even a standing committee on affirmative action. Moreover, despite the fact that the Department of Women and Gender Studies has raised the need for gender research, activism is still timid.

While feminist and gender activism can be piloted by a department or critical mass of gender aware persons or feminists, building a gender-inclusive culture is a collective task. It is not a matter solely for the vice-chancellor or the Department of Women and Gender Studies, but for all. Now that UB has a male vice-chancellor, what will become of previous efforts to build a gender-inclusive culture? Regrettably, we note that to this vice-chancellor, women are second-class citizens who should take their traditional position under men. To him, an awareness of “gender” means only having women at the university as well as men – without acknowledging unequal power relations. This inevitably makes a mockery of Women’s Studies.

## Conclusion

This paper has illustrated one method of assessment of the existence of a gender-inclusive culture in higher education institution, and has shown that the University of Buea has made progress in changing aspects of its culture. The university has a Department of Women and Gender Studies and it had, for many years, a very dynamic and gender-sensitive female vice-chancellor. Our study established that there is a positive perception of feminism and a strong support for a gender-inclusive culture at the University of Buea. Nevertheless, this positive perception and strong support might fade away without an explicit gender policy to guarantee its implementation and furtherance for posterity. If the current leadership is not gender-responsive, what will happen to the efforts put in place by the previous vice-chancellor to consolidate a gender-inclusive culture? The practices which constitute the development of a gender-inclusive culture at the University of Buea will waver if they depend solely on the person at the helm of the institution being

a strong gender advocate. Rather than relying on one individual's interest and goodwill, the sustainable development of a gender-inclusive culture must be the responsibility of all stakeholders of the institution.

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## Endnotes

- 1 We hold that this particular policy will reduce the number of women who are able to teach at university level in Cameroon since fewer women than men pursue or are in PhD programmes.
- 2 This paper is based on an original work by Ngaling (2004) entitled *The Impact of Lecturers' Perception of Feminism on the Promotion of a Gender-inclusive Culture at the University of Buea*.

The work is a master's dissertation under the supervision of Professor Endeley.

- 3 These were adapted from *Creating an Enabling and Empowering Environment for Women in Tertiary Education: A Handbook for African Universities* by FAWE (1998) and "Gender analysis in the field of education: A Zimbabwean example" by R. Gaidzanwa in Imam, A. *et al.* eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*.
- 4 FAWE (2001: 12); FAWE (1998: 6).
- 5 Unesco (1998b: 3).
- 6 Lyonga and Endeley (2006: 57).

# Trajectory of the Institute of Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Emebet Mulugeta

## Introduction

The Institute of Gender Studies (IGS) at Addis Ababa is the only institution for the study of women and gender in Ethiopia. Since its establishment sixteen years ago, the organisation has gone through various ups and downs, marking a lot of achievements and meeting various challenges. This article describes the context in which IGS operates: its objectives, strategies, activities, the challenges faced in carrying its responsibilities and meeting the expectations of various stakeholders. Finally, mention is made of its future prospects.

## The context

### *Ethiopia*

According to a projection made in the 1994 Census, the Ethiopian population is estimated to be 75 067 000; women make up 49,89% of the population. Of the total population, 83,4% live in rural areas.

The situation of girls and women in Ethiopia reflects the unfair gender relationships prevalent in Ethiopian society. Data from the Ministry of Education reveals that girls and women are less represented in education at all levels, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. For example, in the 2005/6 academic year, only 22,3% of the students enrolled in a four-year degree programme were females and only 9,9% of the students in the postgraduate master's programme were female. A similar disparity is observed in secondary schools.

As various data and studies show, women are disadvantaged in the workplace. Data from the Urban Employment survey shows that in 2003, among the total population of the urban areas of the nine regions and two administrative cities, only 42,8% were employed. Looking at the sex-disaggregated data, the survey reveals that only 34,8% of the female population was employed, compared to 51,8% of the male population. Employment in the civil service is also skewed in favour of men. Data from the Civil Service Commission reveals that in 2004/5

there was a total of 351 964 permanent employees, and of these only 31,8% were women. Though women make up about one third of the employees in the civil service, most of them are found in low-status, low-paying jobs. For example, federal data reveals that only 21,8% of the professional and scientific services positions, and 31,2% of the sub-professional services positions, are occupied by women (FCSC, 2005).

Moreover, a number of existing conditions readily expose women in Ethiopia to ill-health. These include low levels of education, especially in rural areas; inadequate or inaccessible healthcare facilities; harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation and early marriage; poverty (which aggravates infectious diseases); illegal abortions (especially in urban areas); lack of appropriate nutrition because of poverty and culture; and socially-condoned violence against women (MOH, 2003). This unfavourable situation is reflected in several health indicators.

Regarding political participation of women, there are 547 seats in the parliament and 15 of them are empty. Of the 530 active seats, 117, or 22,1%, are held by women. There are 12 standing committees, and of these, only two – the Women’s Affairs Committee and the Social Affairs Committee – are chaired by women. A serious gender gap is observed in the number of cabinet ministers as well. According to data from the FCSC, of 28 ministers only two, or 7,1%, are women; and only 14,3% of 42 state ministers are women.

Despite the significant attention given to the agricultural sector and the immense contribution of women to this sector, their access to resources, including land and extension services, is limited. In addition, the traditional division of labour and the lower value attached to the contribution of women disadvantage them by limiting their land size, the number and types of agricultural services provided, and other necessary resources and inputs.

### *Addis Ababa University*

Addis Ababa University, the biggest higher educational institution in the country, was established in 1950. Currently it has over 20 colleges or faculties and 1 069 teaching staff. Female staff constitute only 11,1% of the total teaching staff. Similarly, women are under-represented as heads of departments and deans of faculties. Male faculty hold the top decision-making positions – president, vice-presidents, and most of the dean and director posts. Men hold all 15 central administration positions in the University. A similar trend prevails in the administration wing of the University.

The gender disparity in the student body is also highly visible. In the current academic year, women made up only 27,3% of the students enrolled in regular undergraduate programmes and 10,1% of postgraduate students.

The small female population and patriarchal culture on campus make for a very unfriendly environment, manifesting in harassment, violence (including homicide), stigma against female students regarding affirmative action, and the lack of a gender policy. In general, it is an environment that muffles the voice of female students, to the detriment of their academic, social and personal lives. As female students themselves explain, female students who perform well and who frequently converse with their instructors are seen in a negative light; many of them are afraid of moving around on campus in the evenings; they are pestered when studying in the library; and graffiti on campus is degrading towards female students. Until recently it was only the Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (CERTWID) that was expected to attend to academic, social and other issues related to gender.

A Women's Affairs Office was opened in 2007, and staffed by one person. Female students who come to the office for various inquiries and problems related to their personal, social, and academic lives are given guidance and information.

So here – where there is little awareness about or commitment to gender issues; where there is gender disparity in every sector, and where the unfavourable position of women is manifested through illiteracy, poverty, disease, and violence – CERTWID was established in 1991 with the goal of enabling women to empower themselves economically, socially, politically and culturally.

### **The Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (1991–2005)**

In 1989 a group of five women from Addis Ababa University organised the first and most successful workshop on gender issues in Ethiopia. Workshop papers covered a wide variety of themes including education, health, history, agriculture, craft, and science and technology. It was an important event where gender issues were discussed at the university for the first time, and it indicated the possibility that a lot could be done. The workshop was instrumental in the preparation of a project document for the establishment of what was to become the first and the only university-based institute for teaching and conducting research on gender issues.

The Centre for Research Training and Information on Women in Development (CERTWID) was established in 1991 through a project agreement between the Ethiopian government and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as a focal point to address the problems women encounter in economic, social and cultural spheres. Initially it was one of the units of the Institute of Development Research (IDR) at the Addis Ababa University, directly reporting to the IDR director. CERTWID began its operation with one room and a conference hall provided by IDR as a temporary office.

CERTWID adopted research, education, training, and information and documentation as its main strategies towards achieving the empowerment of women. Accordingly, it:

- conducted, encouraged, sponsored and facilitated research on issues related to gender and development;
- initiated, developed and coordinated training on gender issues, including gender-sensitive research and feminist methodology;
- assisted the government in the formulation of policies and programmes that address the needs of women and remove barriers to their active participation in the development process; and
- strengthened its Information Publications and Documentation Unit through publishing research reports, purchasing and donations.

Over 14 years, CERTWID registered a number of accomplishments in all its focal activities. The research programme had various components: staff research, studies carried out by individual researchers on a scheme of competitive research grants, and student research grants. Especially popular and most successful was the student research grant. This was a competitive research grant awarded to senior undergraduate students and graduate students who wrote their senior papers or MA theses on gender issues. This programme has created awareness, and has helped both students and supervising professors to acquire knowledge and research skills on gender issues. In addition, it has created a wealth of information (46 MA theses and 70 senior papers) on women's and gender issues on a wide variety of topics. Some of the best MA theses and senior papers have been published in the form of research reports.

In the training programme, a number of training workshops were organised for Addis Ababa University (AAU) staff and students, employees of government and non-government organisations working on women's and

gender issues. Some of the workshops were on gender sensitisation; gender mainstreaming; gender-sensitive research methodology; and integrating gender in the AAU curriculum. In addition, CERTWID had a monthly public lecture in which guest speakers from various areas came to deliver presentations and lead discussions.

The Information Publications and Documentation Unit has a library which serves as a resource centre for materials related to women's and gender issues for University staff, students, researchers coming from abroad, and employees of government and non-government organisations working on these concerns. In addition, CERTWID had publications that were distributed widely. These include *CERTWID Informs*, a bi-annual newsletter in which major activities of the centre and current women's or gender issues were discussed. Others are the two-volume *Annotated Bibliography of Gender issues in Ethiopia*; *Narratives of Three Prostitutes in Addis Ababa*; *Gender and Cross-Cultural Dynamics in Ethiopia: The Case of Eleven Ethnic Groups*; *Gender Roles in Agricultural Production among the Sidama of Southwestern Ethiopia*; and *Some Reflections on Criminalizing Domestic Violence Against Women with Emphasis on Ethiopia*.

CERTWID was able to forge a collaborative project in which, in addition to the establishment of a very big research project, two female students were granted scholarships to complete their graduate programmes in Ethiopia, and one staff member her PhD abroad.

These activities were carried out despite several challenges. One of the problems was the lack of both human and financial resources. For a long time, CERTWID had only one coordinator, two MA-holding academic staff (one of whom was writing her dissertation), and another graduate assistant. These few staff members were expected to undertake all the activities at the Centre, in addition to meeting demands from both the university and other organisations. The university called on CERTWID to undertake anything related to women and gender.

In addition, in spite of CERTWID's attempts to clarify its roles and activities, staff members were obliged to be involved in supporting female students in various ways. Female students visited CERTWID for support with academic, economic, social and personal problems. For example, in collaboration with the Rotary Club, needy female students were provided with a monthly stipend. A similar demand came from outside: staff from CERTWID had given training to women parliamentarians and had presented

papers at various fora, at the request of the Women's Standing Committee in Parliament. CERTWID was also called upon to assist in a number of tasks from the then Women's Affairs Bureau, which fell within the Prime Minister's Office. In addition, staff members were expected to participate in various local NGOs supporting women, as board members and in other capacities.

As indicated above, CERTWID was the most under-staffed and under-funded centre on campus. The university paid only staff salaries; all other activities depended on money raised by the centre. Structurally, CERTWID was at one time under the IDR, which meant no representation in important decision-making bodies such as the university senate. This marginalised it even further.

The unfriendly environment at the university created by male-dominated culture, both in the student body and staff, hindered CERTWID's development. The most discouraging problem was financial administration. This was especially problematic since the centre did not have an administrator. Preparing the financial statements required by donors was the task of the coordinator. In addition, even when the centre used donors' money, it was extremely difficult, for example, to hire a consultant at market price since the university had its own standards of pay. Purchasing equipment took years. As a result, the centre was not able to make the best use of its project funds. There were instances in which attempts were made from outside to appropriate the centre's single vehicle, and in which the coordinator had to beg for a driver to support the centre's activities. All these factors as well as the very low salaries paid by the university, which in no way compare with the salaries paid by NGOs to gender experts, made working for CERTWID very unattractive. As a result, another problem was a high rate of staff turnover.

However, despite these numerous challenges and the feeling that more could have been done, CERTWID has survived and evolved to become the current Institute of Gender Studies.

### **CERTWID relaunches as the Institute of Gender Studies in 2006**

In the early 2000s, CERTWID's structure was reorganised and its operation began to change. It became independent of IDR in September 2000, reporting directly to the Associate Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, which enabled it to reduce bureaucracy. In 2006, it was upgraded to institute level as the Institute of Gender Studies (IGS), and began to offer a postgraduate programme in Gender Studies. Currently, there are three batches of students, and two batches will have graduated in September 2007.

The beginning of the MA programme was sudden, and enforced by the government's graduate expansion programme. IGS, with its single staff member qualified to teach in a graduate programme, and some outside assistance, launched its MA in gender studies in March 2006 with 22 students: 15 female and seven male. In September 2006, IGS was forced to take another batch of 21 students, which made the work doubly challenging. In the current academic year, 23 students are enrolled, 17 female and six male, making a total of 66 students.

The beginning of the MA programme witnessed a number of problems. In addition to lack of staff, the unavailability of classrooms, library space, and a computer lab for students proved to be serious stumbling blocks. IGS staff had to use all means, including changing their schedules, to be accommodated in available classrooms belonging to other institutes and departments, and utilise other rooms that had never previously been used as classrooms. Finally the university rented a structure – far from the main campus. Though more space is now available, the off-campus location, the need to visit the main campus for all administrative activities, and the distance from the central activity of the university and its visitors, have also disadvantaged the Institute.

One teaching challenge was that of finding qualified MA thesis advisors and examiners, more so at the end of the academic year when the limited staff (currently two Ethiopian and one expatriate) are overworked. Other activities for which CERTWID was originally established, such as training, assisting the government in the design of policies, publication and dissemination of information, and working in collaboration with other institutes tackling gender issues, have also been ignored. Networking with similar institutes in African countries, which would have helped IGS in exchanging experience and sharing available resources, has been very limited.

## Prospects for IGS

Currently IGS is more focused on its teaching activities, and it seems that the experience of the past two years has been very useful. The foundation has been laid and the teaching programme will continue with more rigour. Though there is support from the university, it will take a few years for IGS to become grounded and strong enough to both carry out its teaching, and undertake other activities which have strategic and long-lasting impact, such as influencing policy, and networking in order to collaborate in dealing with national issues.

In addition to providing qualified personnel, equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills on women's and gender issues, to various organisations, one of the benefits IGS should reap from its graduate programme is the possibility of retaining some of its dynamic graduates to work for the Institute. This process has already begun, and students who will graduate at the end of the academic year have already started applying. There is a feeling that the worst is over, especially the crises related to the beginning of the MA programme, and that in a few years IGS will be strong and ready once again to take up the activities that declined for want of capacity, and to tackle new challenges.

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## *"Reclaiming the P...Word":* a reflection on an original feminist drama production at the University of the Western Cape

Mary Hames

"An emotional rollercoaster – one moment I laughed and the next I cried when the reality of the story struck me." – Audience member

From 14 to 16 September 2005, the Gender Equity Unit (GEU) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) hosted a conference, "Feminist Intellectual Activism – Within and Beyond the Academy", in acknowledgment of the different sites of feminist knowledge creation. The contributions delivered at this conference examined knowledge creation by black women both inside and outside the formal confines of academia. This gave impetus to the idea of promoting the importance of feminist teaching and learning beyond the formal classroom or workshop training contexts in order both to reach wider audiences and to broadly expand feminist knowledge and consciousness.

Among the issues raised at the conference was the fact that post-apartheid South Africa has seen an escalation of violence against women in different forms, ranging from the raping of girl babies, the girl child and women, femicide, and the brutal rape and killing of black lesbians. It was obvious from research and reports that violence in South Africa had a very specific gender, race and class context. Contributors discussed the myths surrounding violence against women, from the belief in "virgin rapes" of babies and young women as a cure for HIV/Aids, to the "curative" or "corrective" rape of black lesbians in order to transform them into "real" women.

Both the conference contributions and the recent national statistics on violence against women profoundly influenced the programme design at the GEU in 2006. The GEU has long realised that the university environment is merely a microcosm of broader society and a reflection of what is happening in our communities. With a significant community of UWC students in

residence (approximately 4 000 of the almost 15 000 students) and with the majority of the administrative and support staff still living in historically black residential areas, we felt it was important for the GEU to take cognisance of how societal violence impacts on the lived realities of the majority of the campus community and its external and domestic relationships.

The new programme development at the GEU also took into account the fact that the country was celebrating major historic events during 2006. The first was the 10th anniversary of the democratic constitution with its progressive stance on women and gender. The second was the 30th anniversary of the Soweto Riots. The third was the 50th anniversary of the historic Women's March to Pretoria on 9 August 1956. The underlying premise of the programmes developed at the unit was to use these anniversaries to measure the advances made by women in South Africa since 1994.

However, what was started as a celebratory and commemorative year soon led to the realisation that the gains afforded to women in this fledgling democracy were marred by daily instances of violence, perpetrated not only by ordinary citizens but by senior political office bearers. Court and disciplinary proceedings of the alleged transgressions of senior male political figures dominated both the print and electronic media and overshadowed the planned activities and celebrations. It was within this framework of celebration overshadowed by loss that the GEU conceptualised a play that would bring black women students and staff together specifically to raise awareness about the othering, objectification and sexualisation of black women's bodies. These national developments presented an opportunity to put the feminist maxim "the personal is political" into action by focusing on the corrupt public morality and the impact that it had on the private and domestic domain.

At first it was thought that a staging of the US drama *Vagina Monologues*, by Eve Ensler, would be an appropriate way to highlight the violence against women in South Africa. But some students could not relate to all the locations and experiences of the US characters in that play. Also, it was impossible to obtain the rights to stage a performance under local conditions.

These problems turned out to be a blessing and a challenge. It was subsequently decided to send out a campus-wide invitation for auditions and to host a series of workshops and discussions in order to produce a "homegrown" South African play by university staff, students and the women from the wider community. These workshops included talks and discussions pertaining to bodily integrity and dignity. Participants were

encouraged to speak about or write down their own experiences. This process took approximately four months and included the sharing of life and lived experiences; the building of confidentiality, trust and respect, and developing the process within the principles of feminist praxis and theory. A play was developed on the basis of the workshop productions, with a flexible script that had multiple elements: feminist education and teaching, the evocation of empathy with the experiences of the cast and characters, the raising of awareness, and shock about the statistics on violence. The play aimed to provide humour and laughter, to present audiences with the reality of life for black South African women in a truthful manner and to capture and hold the attention of the audience for approximately one hour.

UWC is in a part of greater Cape Town usually called the Cape Flats – far away from the economic hub and carefree social activities usually associated with university student life. The residential areas surrounding the university represent mostly the poorer working-class community; violence, drugs and gangsterism form a large part of socio-economic realities. The play would come to reflect these realities.

As the play began to take shape, a performance date was repeatedly postponed because there was no final physical script. Some initial group participants found great difficulty in dealing with the intense personal issues and experiences that cropped up continually. Some of the participants who had been initially interested also found it difficult to write their own personal experiences and lived realities, and preferred to use the scripts of others; one participant felt that the proposed ideas were not sufficiently spiritual; another dropped out because she felt that the proposed script had no artistic value. The main challenge was to convince a group of women to move beyond and confront their own biases and prejudices.

A date was eventually set for the first performance. Three weeks before the play was due to open the scripts started to roll in. Staff and students wrote their own pieces, and eventually eight monologues, one dialogue, one poem and one song were selected. We had to come up with a title that was provocative and truthful, and I proposed *Reclaiming the P...Word*. The “P” stands for *poes* – the Afrikaans term for the vagina. The term has a very specific context and connotation in South Africa, especially among Afrikaans-speaking communities, and is often used in a derogatory sense. The premise of the play (and the use of the term) was to examine such social ideas of embodiment and to provoke debate and raise consciousness about the female body.

The cast was eleven women: it included two staff members, one woman from the community and eight UWC students. A theatre, which we named The Black Box, was specially created in a UWC venue to enhance the intimacy of the performance. The props were minimal, consisting of four chairs and a piano. The first two performances were staged in September 2006 as part of the Learning Cape Festival and the university's annual "Life-long Learning Indaba".

The first performances of *Reclaiming the P...Word* were an overwhelming success and it was decided to stage another two performances as part of the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women Campaign. The following performances were on 25 November and 1 December 2006.

A video of one of the performances was subsequently forwarded to the committee of the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, and we were invited to perform at the Festival. In July 2007, *Reclaiming the P...Word* had five performances in Grahamstown. The official festival newspaper reported:

A vibrant and commanding production, which forces the audience to hear the stories of women that have experienced some sort of sexual abuse, but who have never been able to speak out. The acting is impeccable. An eye-opening experience. – Hayley Richardson, *Cue*, Tuesday 3 July 2007: 12.

Reviews by the audience favorably compared *Reclaiming the P...Word* with the *Vagina Monologues* and put it in the class of the choreopoem *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. Our play includes stories of incest and domestic violence, and comments on violence in the public sphere without apology. In the process it teaches about embodiment and reclaiming bodily integrity, and the importance of reclaiming the self. It uses personal and local experiences and expresses itself in unpretentious language understood by both the educated and semi-educated, and by non-South Africans. It has a universal message that holds importance in a post-colonial era where women's bodies are still under siege in various forms.

As part of the consciousness-raising objective of the play, the cast interacts with the audience immediately after each performance, and the audience is invited to write comments and give feedback. Here are some excerpts from these comments:

Awesome work! Thanks especially for X sharing her pain, X's wit and red tie, X's toys and X reclaiming our heritage; from taxi queen to hetero prude: awesome work! Tour EVERYWHERE please. Long overdue!!!

Very powerful, extremely thought-provoking and although I always hated the word "POES", I'll definitely view it differently from now on . . . with PRIDE!! Thanks ladies, keep up the brilliant work.

Thank you for being brave enough to share your stories.  
Beautiful, inspiring!

At last! I've been waiting for South African women to start sharing their own stories. We are unique in many ways and hence our stories will be as well. Well done to the cast and production team.

## Challenges

As of this writing, we, the cast members of *Reclaiming the P...Word*, have celebrated our first anniversary. We performed several times at the University of the Western Cape; at the National Arts Festival and the University of Cape Town. We had bookings for the 2007 Sixteen Days Against Violence Against Women Campaign, and have provisional bookings to perform during 2008.

However, taking part in the rehearsals and performances posed numerous challenges to the organisers and cast of the play. Part of UWC's history and continuing reality as a disadvantaged university is that it has no drama or performing arts school, and rehearsal and performance space is difficult to find. Secondly, the whole process was an extracurricular activity that took place outside formal course work and teaching times. The students did not receive any academic credit for taking part. Finally, because this was a voluntary activity, nobody received any remuneration.

These conditions of participation placed enormous pressure on cast members, especially students already overloaded with academic work. Some were also working part-time to pay their university fees; only two students had their own cars, while the rest were dependent on unreliable and often dangerous public transport to and from the campus. Though the rehearsals lasted until eight or nine in the evening, public transport only operates until seven. This meant that extensive transport arrangements had to be made for students to be dropped off all across the peninsula – and the organisers were on the city roads until eleven or twelve at night. In the beginning, rehearsals also took place on Saturdays.

There was no institutional support either for transport or for providing food for the students who had to stay on campus for long hours at a time. Everyone

involved made tremendous sacrifices in terms of resources and time. The play was made possible by the sincere commitment to the process from both the cast and the organisers. The first director of the play was an exchange student from the University of Stavanger in Norway. She was also able to raise funds from the Norwegian Peace Corps for the construction of the space of the Black Box. The current director is a UWC student, who is also working for no payment. The success of the performances can be ascribed to the sheer willpower and drive of the cast and their determination to have their stories told.

The rehearsals formed an integral part of building camaraderie, but it also offered the opportunity to teach about embodiment from a feminist perspective. On many days there was no real rehearsal, because the cast used the space to share their experiences of the different forms of violence perpetrated against themselves or women close to them. For some it was the first time that they had ever shared these painful experiences with anyone. There were many occasions on which we could only hold and comfort each other. These were emotional times. Sometimes there were fears that performances could not take place, as the realities of the stories struck home and stage fright became overwhelming.

The ages of the cast ranged from nineteen to fifty years old, but for everybody this was an excellent learning and teaching opportunity. These experiences found reflection in the wonderful monologues that were produced. For all of us, a new kind of awareness and respect for women's bodies was born.

Although much of the healing processes took place during the rehearsals, these sessions could not replace formal counselling. Cast members were encouraged to make appointments with psychologists. During the first few performances, counsellors were invited so that both cast members and the audience would have access to immediate counselling if the need should arise. After the first performance, counselling sessions at the campus health centre were organised for group and individual debriefing as it was the first time that some of the women had shared their personal experiences on a public platform.

## **The script**

The opening piece connects the public with the private by commenting on the current corrupt morals of public figures and the effect of these incidents on the lives of ordinary citizens. Current national and provincial statistics on violence against women are used throughout the script to emphasise the prevalence of misogyny and sexism.

The different monologues that made up the overall script miraculously complemented each other, and not much editing was needed. One of the cast members wrote a song that was sung during two of the performances, and the first two verses epitomise the message of the play:

"I'm a woman  
My spirit is free  
And the person that I love  
The most in the world is me

I own my own body  
I love what I see  
I love every body...  
But most of all  
I love me" (Johanna Booysen, 2006).

The piece about sexual molestation written by Wahseema Roberts (2006) takes the audience on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Here is an excerpt:

"I love it when my lover takes his time. Gently he blows into my vagina, unfolding multiple layers of velvet in there, looking into the binoculars of my intimate self. He looks, touches gently, kisses: he respects...

I hate it when you forcefully lifted my dresses looking into the binoculars of the beast my vagina had come to represent. Ashamed. You stared at it, grabbed, bit: did not respect. My vagina – A beast of burden. You are free 'cause they say you were "mad". You are the victim. *I do not hate you*. But I remember. I am the beast. I am a statistic. Here are my statistics..."

Each piece is intimately connected with the others by the thread of tracing the effects of physical and emotional violence on women's bodies. After each show, somebody in the audience is able to comment on how she could relate to each of the pieces. The performances challenge the audience to connect and reflect by offering both sadness and humour.

## Reflections of the cast

An important factor in the process of writing and performing the play was the establishment of new friendships and understandings across age, class, sexual orientation, religion, race and nationality. For many of the students, it meant discovering that they were not alone, and that there were other young women on

campus who had experienced gender-based violence. These women also took on the responsibility to educate other students and community members about the effects that violence against women had on individuals and the community.

For a number of the cast members the whole process was a tremendous healing journey. There was a spirit of support and understanding. For most of the women, this performance offered the opportunity to share for the first time with family, friends and peers their lived experiences, and that was also the reason why there was tension before every performance. However, there was always the appreciation that there was support for each other, as one of the cast members observed: "The whole cast, even this year (2007), cares and supports each one. We feel as if we are one. I've learnt a lot from the process and the play."

Another cast member said: "This has been one of the most intense and extraordinary experiences of learning and teaching, and it is evidence that the most powerful teaching happens outside the classroom."

More than one woman expressed the idea that this was a time when they "got their voices back". The more the play was performed, the stronger their confidence became to talk and share with the audience.

Prior to the tour to Grahamstown in July 2007, the cast were given exercise books to record their feelings about performing far away from their own comfort zones and about their understanding of their characters. Again, some had great difficulty in writing about their feelings and did not hand their diaries back. Others explored their past and present experiences in depth. Permission was gained from the writers to use some of their thoughts. Here are some of the entries:

Being around the cast of *Reclaiming* has helped me heal in more ways than one... watching X stand up in front of friends and strangers and say, "Thank you for bringing my body back after 21 years!" gives me a strong sense of hope. That one day I too will be able to take ownership of my own life. I too have hope to have the confidence and strength to one day speak with the same voice... and I see that day coming soon.

One of the women used the diary as an alter ego to talk with a young abused woman, and wrote:

*Reclaiming the P... Word* has brought up many issues. One of which you faced and tackled head-on – molestation.

Yet another, who took the role of one of the original cast members, wrote:

I love the performance. The crowd seemed to love it too. While I was on stage I got so lost in my piece, I forgot about the audience! It's an amazing feeling when I no longer feel like I'm reciting a poem but actually speaking about my life! I feel as though I wrote the piece.

The theme throughout the journals is one of hope, of growth and of understanding themselves for the first time.

In conclusion, involvement in *Reclaiming the P...Word* has enabled cast and audience to partake in a journey of healing. The play illuminates the particularly painful experiences of black South African women who experience disrespect and misogyny on a daily basis in a democracy that is supposed to be woman-sensitive and protective. As a teaching tool, *Reclaiming the P...Word* can be regarded as a textbook for the oppressed.



# Salt River

Teresa Barnes

cracked chairs and chicken bones  
 chips plastics and dented tins of all nations  
 bullet-stroked t-shirts, tossed in the canal  
 the quick-eyed slide of  
 calculation  
 Free Mandela! paint on long streets walls  
 where one day only slaves could prance, here:  
 sweet water weaves the salt river marrow down to the opening sea.

before concrete triumph perched on despair mountain people dreaming the  
 rainwind dark day  
 it grandly entered the one-breasted bay  
 most honoured stream, revered with reed songs.

the sweet and salt waters mingle, still, between her warm brown lips  
 everything that sups there, grows there, learns there  
 brings her joy  
 and acquires dual vision.

★

if this is the oldest continent  
 and the earth's oldest gold is found in the little town of Barberton  
 in  
 Mpu  
 ma  
 langa  
 then surely, the world began  
 in

Langa

or, at least, a geological millimeter away

in Sea Point

where the cool shapely Atlantic leg

meets the warm ancient Indian leg

there, by the tidal pool, all that saltiness mingling and churning.

surely this firm right angle of sand is the *poes* of the world

right here at the turn of Beach

Road into Western Boulevard.

*– For the cast of "Reclaiming the P...Word"*

*University of the Western Cape, 2006-07*

## In Conversation

As a woman [in politics], you have to work twice as hard as the average man:  
Zukiswa Mqolomba speaks to Awino Okech

Zukiswa Mqolomba is the immediate former president of the Students Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The SRC at UCT is 101 years old. SRC leadership has been predominantly white and male, with very few women presidents: only ten women in total, and only three of them black. Now aged 22, Zukiswa has several years of experience in student political activism. She was the 2007 recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in student leadership. She is currently an honours student of labour law in the sociology department. She speaks to Awino Okech about student politics; her experiences and lessons learnt from being at the helm of an institution that is seen by many as grooming future national leadership at South African universities.

**Awino Okech:** Let us begin with your personal history. Where did you grow up?

**Zukiswa Mqolomba:** I grew up in King Williams Town, a small town in the Eastern Cape. I went to an all-girls' school, which has partly influenced the person that I am. Because I went to an all-girls' school, I don't feel as if I can't compete with men. My relationship with men isn't one of inferiority. I know that I am capable; we competed academically, socially through debating, and sometimes in sport. I know that I can engage with them at an equal level, unlike in coeducational schools where relationships are defined along romantic lines and not necessarily along competition on an equal footing. So, this gave me an advantage.

My mom is a single parent; my dad passed away when I was seven. I was raised by strong women. My grandmother was a single parent. So my notion of leadership is of female leadership because I have seen it work well; the provider, the mother, the nurturer, and the carer. Those are my influences.

AO: Tell me a little bit about your history. You say you have been active in student politics. How did that come about?

ZM: I began at Baxter Hall as head student. I was then introduced to the student parliament, and this was my entry point into student leadership at UCT. I was then appointed deputy chairperson of the student parliament. I joined the South African Students' Congress (Sasco)<sup>1</sup> in 2006. There, I was exposed to political education through meetings where you begin to understand the role of political formations within a national context, provincial, and even an institutional context. It is also an opportunity to engage with other comrades, figuring out what your role will be within the framework.

AO: Let's talk about the SRC and how it operates.

ZM: Most SRCs operate on the party-based system, meaning you vote for the party, which then deploys an individual. So, Sasco, African National Congress Youth League (Ancyl) and the Pan African Students' Movement of Azania (Pasma) are the political formations in the other institutions and they deploy cadres to the SRC. But at UCT you vote for the individual. However, there is room for political parties to operate.

AO: When you speak about political parties you mean... ?

ZM: ANC (African National Congress), DA (Democratic Alliance) and the other youth leagues of national political parties. I am a Sasco deployee. I am also an Ancyl member and a member of International Youth Leadership Africa. Luckily, I was deployed by Sasco onto the SRC. I have been in student governance for the last three years. So I moved from being a head student, sub-warden, deputy chairperson of student parliament, and deputy chair of the Humanities Student Council. I have been heavily involved in student governance here and also outside. So deploying me onto the SRC was an obvious choice because I had proven myself. At UCT, it is not really a big deal to be a woman president.

The honest truth however, is that when you engage with SRCs in other institutions, people doubt your capacity and ability to reason [as a woman]. You are seen to be too emotional and cannot participate in informal political processes such as the caucuses. The honest truth is that women are often deployed but only to be the faces; they don't participate in the informal decision-making processes. They give the good governance speech, but often they are the deputy chairperson, deputy treasurer or deputy something, if they are not doing administration or some other project-based portfolio. They are never given positions where they can lead and provide political direction – because people don't believe in them.

It is also a traditional thing [for] our men (Zulu and Xhosa) and the church, because the church does say a man is the head of the family. So they enforce the notion that men are supposed to lead and that women can't somehow, that a woman's place is in the kitchen or raising the kids. So the notion of inferiority/superiority exists. As a woman, you have to work twice as hard as the average man. You know when you go to congresses [that] men will say the most stupid things, but people will laugh and clap hands [anyway]. If it were a woman, it would be so embarrassing for her.

AO: Things like?

ZM: Silly comments . . . like you may be having a serious discussion on a political matter and they will be making jokes about it. It isn't something that is valuable in terms of enriching the discussion, but because it comes from a man, somehow it is excusable. The moment a woman makes a mess-up, immediately they will say this woman needs political education or they need to go through some women empowerment programmes. [This happens sometimes] in the Ancy and Sasco, where there is recognition that women were oppressed, [and that] it was triple oppression (woman, black and poor). In terms of their transformation programmes, women form part and parcel of those processes, but it is very conceptual and theoretical. People like to speak it and preach it but they do not necessarily want to honour it in terms of practice.

For example, the quota system: we had to fight for the quota system. Often you go to a congress<sup>2</sup> and the minimum requirement is that women should form 30% of the delegation. The men stick to the minimum, because for them, the minimum serves as the maximum ceiling. When we went to a South Africa Union of Students congress in Bloemfontein, it was indicated that out of the six delegates sent, three had to be women. Some institutions couldn't be bothered – they just brought men. Yet, the programme was very clear that you had to have three women in the delegation or there would be penalties.

Women are not taken seriously. Often they are part of people's social programmes. You go to congress and women are used to lobby other comrades. They are not part of the lobby groups or caucuses. It is only women who have proven themselves and have to have served over longer periods who have access to these structures, as opposed to men who are able to access decision-making processes rather easily.

AO: Do you see yourself as an SRC president or a woman SRC president, or do you see yourself as a youth leader? Is your gender important to what you bring to your leadership?

ZM: [laughs] I am a president. Whether I am male or female is not irrelevant because you are aware that you are seen from a deficit approach; you have to prove yourself. Sometimes you can be in a meeting with forty-year-old men discussing a labour issue on campus and you are leading the process. They will be very shocked because you are a woman and there will be resistance at first until you open your mouth and indicate that you have an understanding of the issues and this is the proposed way forward. Then you are taken seriously. So you are aware and hence have to compensate for their lack of belief in you, and prove yourself. I am a president and that's the most important thing. I am a president in context, leading leaders in a team. I am not a token representative. I was speaking to [former deputy health minister] Ms. Madlala-Routledge and she was saying to me that I have opened up opportunities for other women by doing it "well". So, often you are aware of the legacy that you are inheriting, and that which you have to leave behind.

AO: Let's shift to the campaign process. What was your experience? What were the highlights and the challenges?

ZM: I had a good support system, support from my organisation (Sasco) because they wanted a seat on the SRC; so it was in their and my interests to win the election. You have to do your homework about the Higher Education Act, you need to know what the Department [of Education] is trying to achieve, what are the issues on campus, previous SRC decisions, and come up with creative ways of tackling issues on campus. SRC work is extremely challenging, it is not like being a prefect. You have to engage the vice-chancellor as if you are equals. You have to develop principled arguments, be an intellectual, and be well read, because people won't take kindly to strikes and protests. It is cute, it's what students do but it doesn't change the mindset in relation to particular issues. Unless you convince the decision-makers that this is good not only for the students but also for UCT, chances are that you are going to fail dismally. Our objectives may be the same but one has to figure out what is the best strategy at any given time. Do you have strikes? Do you lobby already-established institutional powerhouses? Do you mobilise the masses on a particular issue, what is the best tactic for now? People have agendas and you have to be aware of them. There are opportunities for you to compromise your values. You know, I am Christian and often I struggle.

AO: Tell me more about that.

ZM: Well, for example critiquing, embarrassing or shunning the vice-chancellor. Somehow his office has been disempowered. My personal opinion

is that he was managed; he rubber-stamped decisions already made in other forums. Also his personality, as an academic he is an intellectual, but he is a soft, gentle man. He is not loud or aggressive, he isn't dictatorial and I think sometimes he plays too much of a diplomat. There are people who will assert their political decisions and if you are not conscious of the political terrain within which you are working then you are going to lose. However, I would never critique the individual. You need to deal with the issue. So if you are going to critique [the vice chancellor] you must critique the institution, its culture and its climate. You can't embarrass the man because that is not going to change anything.

AO: Do you think there is a tendency to do that? To deviate to personality rather than issue-based politics? Is it a masculine approach to leadership?

ZM: I am not sure if it is a masculine tendency or if it is comrades in general. The culture of political formations is to be militant, and you deal with the individual for some strange reason. It is not what the organisations stand for but it is the current practice, maybe because they learn it from high-level politicians. Often, people lose sight of the issue at hand and buy into power play. For me, it is not a tactic that I want to employ.

AO: How do you manage that, when you are working in an environment that endorses this as a legitimate approach to strategy-building?

ZM: I have been clear that those are not strategies that I will employ. It is not wise; it compromises my person so I am not going to do it. Then, I am seen as not being a politician, because I am taking the principled route while the average politician is seen as doing everything possible to achieve the objective. So even if the objectives are noble we will differ on the best strategy. I am too principled for my own good and I get in trouble.

I am very outspoken and when I think something is wrong, it is wrong and I am not going to change. Another example was when we had the Zimbabwe protest march to Parliament and got national coverage. It was not something that was highly supported by comrades because it was seen as standing up against a national position. Our focus was on human rights and the undermining of the democracy in Zimbabwe. We were not supporting the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) or Zanu-PF. We were supporting transformation of Zimbabwe generally. People were uneasy but I strongly believed in it. I was not going to back down because it was unpopular within the organisation. So you do get shunned and are seen as not being politically wised-up for standing up against the national position. Often they want you

to toe the party line, yet sometimes you can't. You have to go with what is right. It is not easy and one has to weigh the cost and benefit, one has to consult and come up with an amicable position.

AO: I hear you speak a lot about cadres and militancy within current political leadership models. I am aware that a lot of political parties in South Africa were structured in this way, due to the history of political organising in the country, but does this need revision? When I hear "cadres", I see little tin soldiers marching to the official command without missing a beat. How much dialogue exists within such a structure?

ZM: [Much laughter] I believe in the principle of being a disciplined member of the movement. You need to march the same, but with internal platforms for disagreement. Decisions must be made by consensus. The problem arises when internal dialogue is suppressed. This leads to frustration. Decisions should be influenced by the membership.

Obviously, there should be an alignment of your goals and those of the party in terms of what you want to achieve at various levels of the society, but tactics are important. It is people who govern who in turn exploit their positions in organisations for their own individual interests. I can't afford to be compromised, so if dialogue is suppressed, I will go for conviction. But if the space for dialogue exists, then I do not mind not having my way.

It is also important that it is not token dialogue. Because sometimes decisions have already been taken by high level authorities... but a false notion of dialogue and consensus building is created

AO: Earlier on you indicated that here at UCT, it is not a particularly big thing to have a woman SRC president, while in other universities this would be [a big thing]. What would you attribute this to?

ZM: The focus at UCT is on efficiency, on getting the work done, but in other universities the focus is on forging political alliances for future reference. UCT also claims to be a liberal institution where there is a platform for everyone.

In other SRCs, having a female secretary-general is the biggest [issue]. This is because the president and the secretary-general are the key decision makers in the organisation. Some comrades go as far as saying that a female will never lead them. It is shocking, in this day and age where women leadership is being preached as part of the transformation agenda, yet women are still seen as lacking something. There is a deficit approach to women's leadership, that they do not have what it takes.

The world of politics is very rough. It's dominating, it's very military as well, and women are not necessarily seen to have those characteristics, [nor as] being assertive and [capable of] making the not-so-"principled" decisions that men can. I think women are led by conscience. They are more humanitarian in their approach. That would explain why women are not seen as fitting [into this dominant model of leadership]. Yet, when a woman is assertive and strong in voicing her opinions, she is sidelined and it is said she is trying to be a man.

AO: Isn't that interesting though, that within institutions where leadership is being moulded towards future national positions, women are shunned?

ZM: It comes down to the theory and practice debate. The movement is very clear on women's emancipation – give women a chance because they can, don't look at women from a deficit approach. It is very clear, but practice is different. People are trying to further their own individual interests, and if policies do not fall in [line with] this, they do not comply with them. It is about the practice: what do men speak about when they go to clubs to decide on women leadership, are women taken seriously at those forums? Are the women present at those caucuses because that is where decisions are made, at the informal gatherings? Are women a part of those processes or are they just a part of their social programmes? It is not the movement, but individuals within the movement trying to preserve power, hence compromising the gender position.

AO: Are there strong women leaders in the other institutions?

ZM: Not many. At a conference, we would be, like, five or eighteen out of a hundred.

AO: Are there women lobby groups during the student congresses? Do you lead some sort of lobby group to ensure more women hold decision-making positions within the various SRCs?

ZM: At the Bloemfontein congress, we had a women's caucus. We got into trouble because comrades questioned how the caucus could exist outside of the current structure. Men were aggressive, saying we were out of order, and yet there are caucuses everywhere. People caucus across provinces, build personal alliances and network, but as soon as women get together, "Aha! Who do they think they are?" The problem also is that women, as I mentioned earlier, are hardly presidents or secretary-generals, yet these are the people invited to these congresses. There are women leaders but they are deputising. Hence they will never be a part of high-level forums, because they are not occupying key decision-making positions, but the administrative and service positions.

AO: I am interested in the connection between most African governments', and, in this instance the South African government's national rhetoric about "youth are the leaders of tomorrow" – and how that gap is bridged in practice. Has there been an interest from current women in government in you and your work?

ZM: There are a range of networking opportunities: conferences, congresses, symposiums, colloquiums, but it is also done directly through the AncyL and Sasco. Political formations are the way to go because they are conscious of the political struggle. At UCT, for example, we think the struggle is over and there is no need for comradeship. Yet, there is still so much on the transformation agenda. You can't achieve transformation in fourteen years. Being part of these structures makes you understand that you live in a political terrain. People have interests as individuals and as groups. People want to achieve hegemony over sectors that have access to capital. You can do it as individuals or as groups, so whether people are aware of it or not, there are interest groups everywhere.

AO: Any future political ambitions?

ZM: Not now. I have learnt and observed a lot. I now need to develop the theoretical and conceptual understanding of organisational systems. I love governance. I think it is important to run a good administration. Efficacy and efficiency are important. The plan is to go to the private sector and learn the skills of running an organisation well. Not from a profit motive, but from a service delivery motive that gives incentive to workers. I want to be involved in community work through the private sector, to channel social investment capital to the community. Then, doing the labour law work, representing the interests of the workers. I want to have a family, develop relationships and a support network. Maybe at a later stage venture into diplomatic work and international relations.

## Endnotes

- 1 SASCO has traditionally been politically allied to the African National Congress.
- 2 These are annual student congresses that bring SRCs together from universities all over South Africa.

# Review

Amina Mama

*Change and Transformation in Ghana's Publicly Funded Universities: A Study of Experiences, Lessons and Opportunities.* Takyiwaa Manuh, Sulley Garba and Joseph Budu. Oxford: James Currey; Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2007; and

*Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System.* Charmaine Pereira. Oxford: James Currey; Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books. Nigeria, 2007.

These two titles present the latest in a series of valuable case studies of African universities, commissioned and published in association with the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA). The partnership that commissioned these two studies has tasked itself with supporting (rather than bypassing) actual African initiatives, so its interventions – including the publications reviewed here – are worth watching.<sup>1</sup> It's still an open question what the impact of this goodwill – and the money it brings – will actually be.

African intellectuals are quick to point out the irony of this new interest, but can only welcome it, given that the West is now, albeit belatedly, agreeing that decent tertiary education is central to the region's survival and development. The meaning of “revitalisation” that is offered remains contested, dominated by competing notions of the meaning of “reform”, some neoliberal and economic, some liberal and well-intentioned, others highly critical of both of these tendencies and insisting on retaining a focus on social justice agendas. However, for all of us, the two main questions are these: what can Africa's universities contribute to the continent in the context of globalisation and the neoliberal economic reforms? How can we ensure that our universities go beyond servicing the global market and facilitating brain drain, to contribute to the development of democracy, social justice and gender equality in the region?

Between them, the universities presented in these two books produce the majority of Africa's graduates and career academics. Both books are framed by a deep interest in the possibilities of institutional transformation. They describe studies and research carried out by leading scholars living and working in the countries in which the public universities they study

are located. They do an excellent job of presenting the institutions in their national and political context. However, as national case studies, they do not address a key limitation of the post-independence universities: institutions that have not pursued the possibility of playing a more substantial role in developing cross-border intellectual, political and policy agendas.

Both books discuss the close interaction between the campuses and their surroundings, in nations where the universities have survived and grown through periods of repressive military rule and severe economic crisis, structural adjustment strictures, and through transitions to civilian rule. Throughout all this, Nigerian and Ghanaian universities have remained key sites for teaching and research, always sustaining some levels of reflection and dissent. This has often come at a cost to their academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Led by well-known feminist scholars Takyiwaa Manuh in Ghana and Charmaine Pereira in Nigeria, both of whom are as committed to activism as they are to research, it is not surprising to find that both studies engage seriously with gender as a tool of analysis, even though both were conceptualised as national case studies, rather than as gender studies. Pereira's book is a study of gender by default, having been designed as part of an ill-fated national study. In this respect she is to be commended for following through on her own steam to produce the first-ever book-length study of gender in Africa's largest higher education system. Pereira does indeed take us beyond the questions of women's access that were the focus of Kwesiga (2002, reviewed in FA1). We must hope that these initial studies will be followed up by other feminist scholars who have already carried out valuable research at various locations, not all of which research is yet available in published form (but see FA8 for some examples).

Both books offer gender-statistical profiles of the major public universities in Ghana and Nigeria, noting that the inequalities that abound go far deeper than statistics. They highlight the under-representation of women in policy-making, and the curriculum struggles that have produced teaching in gender studies. Together, they expand the emerging pool of African gender and higher education studies and extend the work presented and reviewed in previous issues of FA (Kwesiga, 2002, reviewed in FA1; Mabokela *et al*, 2004, reviewed in FA4; FA8), and this issue, FA9.

The studies on which the books are based differed methodologically. Both include useful reviews of existing research, archival work and analysis of policy documents. But the Ghana study is able to present more original material,

derived from a series of far-reaching consultations and workshops held in the major public institutions. The debates and deliberations documented convey a good sense of the collective interests and contestations between various stakeholders in the Ghanaian university system, and its rather limited engagement with other research and policy institutions.

Pereira's study is somewhat constrained by its reliance on existing sources and documents, although she makes good use of the discussions with what looks like a rather modest sample of key informants drawn from only a handful of the 47 or so public institutions in 2001. It is clear that the time is ripe for much more comprehensive field-based gender research in a wider range of Nigeria's universities.

Both studies point to the centrality of gender as a systemic aspect of all educational institutions, and go on to document persistent gender disparities in access, as well as within the system and its institutions. They find that gender is not taken seriously by university stakeholders or policy-makers, despite their sometimes progressive rhetoric (a theme more fully examined in the contributions by Tsikata in FA8, and Shackleton in this issue). For Nigeria, Pereira grimly observes that:

The stark absence of a transformative agenda for university education on the part of the government constitutes the single most significant obstacle to push forward an agenda for gender equity (108).

Manuh *et al* are no less bleak in their observation that:

. . . gender did not seem to be a conscious issue on the (university authorities') agendas. The public universities in Ghana have no gender policy, and their policy frameworks are not attuned to gender concerns... they pay little attention to gender issues and inequalities (128).

Whereas Manuh *et al* include one chapter dedicated to a focus on gender, Pereira's whole book is all about gender in the university system. Her far-reaching title invokes somewhat more than it proves possible to deliver, no doubt because of the methodological and practical difficulties of actually isolating and addressing gender dynamics in the making of any system. These dynamics would be especially profound in the complicated, dispersed, and poorly-coordinated university system that she describes. To isolate and identify gender dynamics in any system requires in-depth qualitative research methods that go beyond the analysis of statistical profiles and policy statements to explore institutional cultures, in full cognisance of the manner in which gender permeates the cultural identities, social relations and

subjectivities of the women and men who live, work and study in the system. In this sense, analysing gender in Nigeria's university system would actually have required a very different study from that which was possible within the Foundation-sponsored national case study that gave rise to this book.

Nevertheless, Pereira's discussions with a number of women who have worked in particular universities (Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Ibadan) offer rich and nuanced insights that make the reader wish she had been able to gather far more – and had included interviews with women and men currently involved in university life. In the absence of these, she makes extensive use of the conversations she did gather, and draws on her own experience within the system and in the scholarly networks she has been participating in, to sustain a provocative discussion that effectively sets the scene for further in-depth research. After presenting a necessary overview of the history of higher education in Nigeria, the structure of the system, and statistical profiles, the chapter (eight) on institutional culture addresses women's poor representation in policy-making. This is followed by a discussion of sexual harassment, introduced, discomfortingly to my mind, as "the flipside of women's poor visibility at the top... its subterranean complement". This discussion reviews the existing literature (drawn in part from the Southern African work of Bennett and others), noting the reluctance of Nigerian policy-makers to engage with this particular scourge. Pereira introduces the term "sexual corruption", presumably to accommodate a wide range of sexual transactions that occur, and in response to the fact that Nigerian men constantly allege that they are victims of harassment by women. This difficult territory demands more detailed research and attention, because we cannot afford to have the veracity of sexual harassment – of women by men – undermined by the fact that there are other kinds of sexual transactions that occur and compromise both sexes.

There is a brief presentation of women's organisations on the campuses – listing the National Association of University Women formed in 1959, the Network for Women's Studies formed in 1998 and the five campus-based centres for gender/women's studies at the universities of Ibadan, Ife, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Nsukka. This important chapter could have been much longer. As it is, it ends tantalisingly, with a quick list of the familiar ways in which men resist women's presence on campus, which in this reader's view is exactly the terrain on which to investigate how gender dynamics work in the "making of the system".

Overall, it becomes patently clear that gender has barely been addressed within a Nigerian university system in which sexual harassment and blatant discrimination are widespread, and in which men are highly resistant to any proactive engagement with gender discrimination. The policy context is hardly favourable, as policy-makers within and beyond the campus also show little interest in changing the status quo.

The Ghana study is more broadly cast to address “Change and Transformation”, concentrating on the contemporary context with less attention to history, and focusing on the three premier institutions: University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast and Kumasi National University of Science and Technology. The chapter dedicated to gender addresses both institutional and intellectual aspects, albeit briefly. Ghana, too, displays continued gender disparities in student enrolment and staffing. Manuh *et al* depict the universities’ institutional cultures as being imbued with conservative patriarchal assumptions that marginalise women and subject them to varying degrees of overt and subtle discrimination. In the Ghana study too, sexual harassment is identified as a major aspect of gender oppression on the campuses, with highly problematic transactions arising between staff and students, between staff, and among students. Manuh *et al* also adopt the concept of “sexual corruption” alongside that of “sexual harassment”, although without fully exploring the political and policy implications of doing so.

In terms of the curriculum, they find that the lack of leadership support and resources (as in Nigeria) is offset by the enthusiasm displayed by staff and students towards the inclusion of gender in the core curriculum. As is the case elsewhere in Africa, what course content does exist is due to the efforts of individual faculty located in mainstream departments. In this context, it is positively surprising to learn that there are as many as 16 courses addressing gender at University of Cape Coast, and over 20 at University of Ghana.

Intellectual cultures, the core concern of gender and women’s studies, are clearly not the focus of any of the other institutional studies in the PHEA-supported series, so both Pereira and Manuh’s books contribute valuably to thinking about scholarship – an aspect of universities that many of us would consider to be absolutely central. The androcentrism of mainstream intellectual cultures is largely intact and unquestioned in West Africa, despite the discursive shift that has been achieved in the political and policy arenas where gender and gender mainstreaming are irrefutably now part of the general discourse. Mainstream teaching and research have proven highly resistant to any real engagement with gender analysis, let alone feminist

theory. In this respect, the impact of those who have sought to introduce gender studies is remarkable, and owes a great deal to both the activist roots of academic feminism, and to the transnationalism of women's movements that reach across the broader national and international environments with which the universities are compelled to at least attempt to keep pace.

These two studies demonstrate the diffuse understanding, if not confusion, around the meaning of managerial and administrative "reform" in the African higher education sector. There has been minimal engagement with the policy implications of the current global scenario for universities that have remained primarily national institutions, poorly equipped to engage with regional integration, let alone the global market economy. The gender implications of the economic and administrative reform processes that are ongoing have yet to be explored in any detail, along with the implications for regional intellectual development. These two aspects clearly need to be central aspects of future studies. Neither of these studies attempts a critical engagement with the philosophical and intellectual challenges of envisaging the higher education that postcolonial African societies must now develop. Indeed their engagement of the intellectual culture is limited to tantalisingly brief consideration of research and the teaching curriculum, and notes the presence of gender studies. However, both books are essential reading for those working and studying in universities, for policy-makers, and for researchers who seek to contribute transformative knowledge to the cause of Africa's development and transformation.

Meanwhile, the recommendations of these two books are clear: universities need to take their public accountability and social responsibility on board, and this means making more deliberate and concerted efforts to dedicate resources and develop expertise that will facilitate institutional and intellectual transformations that take matters of gender equity and social justice seriously, for the greater public good.

From an activist perspective, they offer important raw material for the advance of feminist struggles in the academy. The questions they raise may not be new, but clearly remain to be addressed if African universities are indeed to be revitalised and rehabilitated. It is clear that universities have to be radically changed and their intellectual assumptions seriously transformed, and it is here that a feminist perspective has the most to offer.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The Partnership was founded in 2000 by four leading philanthropic foundations, which united with the expressed aim of reaffirming “the importance of a vibrant intellectual environment in Africa in nourishing social, political, and economic transformation”. The “big four” (Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation) made an initial commitment of US\$100 million to be spent within the first five years. The countries targeted for this investment are Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. By 2005, the target funding was extended by a further US\$50 million, and the Partnership committed a further \$200 million for the coming five years, now joined by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Kenya was added to the list of Partnership countries, to be followed by Egypt and Madagascar in 2006. In April 2007, the Kresge Foundation became the seventh member of the partnership.



# Review

Zethu Cakata

"The African University in the 21st Century", *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19. Special theme issue, 2005.

Higher education today has been greatly affected by major shifts due to economics, history, and politics, factors which reinforce current global-institutional reframing challenges. South African universities are also faced with the political urgency to be adaptive, more so in the face of colonial legacies and postcolonial challenges for transformation and redress. In terms of the latter, innovative but sometimes stifling debate and prescriptive arguments often characterise the intellectual discourse on the changing landscape of African universities.

South African higher education institutions have also faced many challenges since the legal demise of apartheid in 1994. Our higher education system has changed and is changing, and debates within these institutions regarding identity, pedagogies, knowledge production, teaching and learning have not always been productive in moving institutions forward. One of the most common themes by far, in debates within and among higher education institutions in South Africa, has been the question of identity: namely, what constitutes the African university? In as much as this is a political question, it is also a sociological, philosophical and historical investigation into what constitutes the "African university" and how the "African experience" is truly reflected within our higher education institutions.

While important, these questions, in my opinion, do not necessarily reflect a new trend sweeping all spheres of social, political and cultural life in South Africa today. The urgency for political change has long been a focus of South African politics (post-1994). Education under apartheid has always been a subject of debate, and both our schooling system and higher education landscape have seen many challenges in the wake of democracy, and calls to develop our universities into African institutions. Unfortunately these crucial issues are not taken up in any rigorous way in this edition of the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, an internationally-accredited journal published by the South African Association of Research and Development

in Higher Education. Interdisciplinary in approach, its purpose is merely to provide institutions of higher education and professional readers with scholarly information on major innovations in higher education, on research projects and on trends.

Long before it became the centre of academic debate, the meaning of “education in Africa” had already occupied the minds of ordinary people. Education had always been received with great ambivalence because a Western value system tended to undermine African realities (especially in the context of the colonial legacy). Despite this scepticism, the ideas and meanings regarding the African university featured here generate hope that higher education could produce scholarship and learning that responds to the specific “needs” of communities and in ways that make the continent an important producer of knowledge that rivals the West and the North.

It could be said that the arguments in this volume attempt to focus on the future prospects of what an African university may entail in the twenty-first century, but unfortunately, this is done in a circuitous way.

This special edition contains commissioned papers of conference proceedings of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education held on 27-29 June 2005 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, entitled “The African University in the 21st century”. Articles tackle pedagogical and epistemological issues as they relate to (South) African higher education. This edition principally takes stock of higher education in South Africa (and in some cases elsewhere on the continent) and emphasizes that higher education in Africa cannot be separated from the continent’s history with the Western world. How knowledge is produced and disseminated has a lot to do with the past and current interactions with the West.

When we speak of an African university today (as reflected by these articles) we are encouraged to move beyond narrow geographical localities to more critical ways of becoming by engaging with insights from varied experiences across the continent. Several papers take stock of knowledge production claims (notably the reliance on Western models) and the apparent reluctance (in part also by African scholars) to take the African pedagogical context into account. A common thread in the articles is a focus on “teaching” and “learning” (and “scholarship”) as constitutive elements of an African university. Structurally the edition contains nine feature articles, excluding the sketchy editorial by Ramose on “The African university in the twenty-first century”. Sadly, the editorial is disturbingly thin: it could have framed the

edition in ways that addressed some of the broader thematic and conceptual issues related to the theme of the conference. In addition, Waghid's paper at the end could more appropriately have been a feature editorial article.

The articles in this volume address, in broad terms, the following issues: indigenous education to undergraduates in Nigeria (Kolawole); "Africanising" assessment through an understanding of *ubuntu* (Beets & Le Grange); the notion of "engagement" in relation to the African university (Le Grange); the use of educational biographies in teaching and learning (Leibowitz *et al*); a case study of postgraduate supervision of students from Lesotho (Mapesela & Wilkinson); Africa[n]-focused research (Mapesela *et al*); evaluation of tertiary institutions (Steynberg *et al*); assessment and needs of postgraduate learners (Van Tonder *et al*); and the possibility of an African university (Waghid).

The contribution by Waghid draws our attention to the need to craft a scholarship that incorporates principles of "criticism", "deliberation" and "relationship" (elements he outlines as necessary preconditions for cultivating a university of "excellence"). To him, education can be seen as a process that allows students to move beyond what is given, to interrogate subject matter and "engage" with information. He believes in a contested and negotiated scholarship. An African university, he argues, would mean veering away from the fascination with outputs, throughputs and outcomes and rather be concerned with building scholars who are critical of knowledge and are given spaces to interrogate knowledge claims. Waghid asserts that knowledge is neither given nor universal. Conceptually, his is one of the two strongest papers in this edition. He contests the notion of an African university by indicating that a reflective and critical interrogation of scholarship and learning is central to the naming and meaning of the African university.

There is an admirable attentiveness in Waghid's paper to the context of experience in the challenges facing students: "I specifically think of many South African university students who claim to be critical, yet do not even begin to wonder how their education could respond to [...] what must be done for those who remain tragically in need, who suffer deprivations such as family deterioration, neighbourhood decline, joblessness, illnesses such as HIV/Aids and addictions."

Le Grange's paper on "engagement" also takes up the issue of learning as a process in the making. For Le Grange the possibility of an African university requires new ways of engagement with knowledge production and dissemination. She speaks to the need to de-centre the process of

knowledge production in a way that sees no boundaries between Western and indigenous knowledge. For universities to be able to respond to African realities they need to make efforts that take into account local realities. In her view, this would mean engaging with wider society, ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems receive prominence in knowledge production, and that the dissemination process reaches various contexts. Le Grange argues for a space where boundaries between Western and indigenous knowledge are dissolved, saying that we should move towards producing new knowledge that helps to address Africa's problems.

Beets and Le Grange examine the extent to which the current shifts in assessment practice and theory fail to accommodate the socio-cultural backgrounds of African learners. They consider education as a site of transformation that in itself is in need of transformation. They also advocate new ways of looking at assessment, to incorporate the principles of "*ubuntu*" to enhance effective learning and teaching. To these authors, assessment is not an outcome, but a process. Educators, in their view, need to take into account what learners bring to the assessment process (this relates to an understanding of learners' socio-cultural backgrounds). Utilising the principles of *ubuntu* for these two authors would mean that the assessment process treats learners with compassion, understanding and empathy.

Van Tonder *et al* also believe in incorporating innovative assessment methods into teaching as part of a transformational learning approach for postgraduate students. The authors believe that innovative methods, such as the patchwork text, may yield positive results as this assignment format allows learners to play an active role in their own assessment. Developed in the Anglia Polytechnic University in the UK, the "essence of a patchwork is that it consists of a variety of small sections... gradually assembled during the course of a phase of teaching... a sequence of fairly short pieces of writing" that cover the educational objectives of a course.

Kolawole's article on students' perceptions of indigenous education is a useful contribution to the current debate on the value of indigenous knowledge as the basis for development initiatives. The paper addresses Nigerian university students' perceptions of the introduction of indigenous knowledge systems theory and practice in higher education. Kolawole concludes that respondents in his study had a positive opinion about the appropriateness of the incorporation of indigenous education into the national curriculum. The major limitation of the study was the small sample

size and the fact that the sample was drawn only from agriculture students. Perhaps his conclusion is unsurprising, as strong evidence demonstrates the almost immediate connections between agriculture and indigenous knowledge systems.

For their part, Mapesela and Wilkinson draw from their own experiences, as experienced postgraduate supervisors, and those of their students. They argue that shaping future researchers demands that supervisors are empathetic to students' socio-economic realities, understand their backgrounds and offer patience and support. These qualities are especially critical given the continuous demand to produce black academic researchers. Academic institutions, they maintain, need to be realistic, setting targets to ensure that supervisors are not burdened by constraints such as time, resources and relevance. Another important issue they interrogate is the notion of internationalisation of higher education, and they consider the challenges this poses to the provision of effective teaching and learning relevant to the multicultural realities of students. Steynberg *et al* also take stock of internationalisation, and highlight the fact that the concept is influenced largely by market ideology, which treats education as a commodity that can be traded among nations. They maintain that, increasingly, education is fuelled by globalisation and commercialisation, which could either harm higher education or possibly allow it to prosper.

In another article, Mapesela *et al* focus on the upliftment of rural or underprivileged communities. It is the result of work conducted by two masters' students who follow a community-focused approach that asks what constitutes Africa[n]-focused research. This paper reflects on the gap between knowledge acquired and the actual needs of communities. Two case studies from Lesotho are presented, describing how the authors attempted to introduce projects to communities but were met with challenges. Community development, as can be concluded from this experience, is a two-way process. The danger that researchers, academics and development agents need to guard against (as suggested by the authors) is the "expert" approach to community development, which results in barriers and impediments to effective learning. The authors suggest this should be a process in which dialogue is facilitated to ensure that community members are not just recipients but active participants in development.

Apart from the article by Waghid, the insightful views by Leibowitz *et al* on the use of educational biographies to inform teaching and learning stand

out as the key piece in this edition. Given that our personal identities and experience impact on what we bring to the teaching and learning process, Leibowitz *et al* argue for an honest reflection by scholars about who they are and/or, perhaps, who they want to be. Central to the meaning in this article is the value to be gained by reflection as well as disclosure within the dialogue towards transformation in learning. Our backgrounds are an integral part of the learning and teaching process, and according to the authors, honest reflection would help address the social and cultural injustices that plague African universities today.

Unfortunately, after reading this focus on the “African University”, I find I remain confused as to what the African university really is. While useful insights in the individual articles concentrate principally on teaching and learning (which is important), hardly any attention is given to institutional cultures that shape the development of an African university. While factors such as race, class, politics, and power are important, I was struck by the fact that scant attention was paid to gender, sexuality and culture – issues pertinent to the development of an African university. It would seem that none of the issues raised by this conference and the subsequent papers indicated a reflection on sexism within universities or the heterosexist bias still prevalent in institutional culture and in teaching and learning. Any serious consideration or imaging of an African university in the twenty-first century would require a serious engagement with women, so often excluded, as active participants in higher education. Beyond the numbers, the questions of how teaching, learning and scholarship continue to reflect gender bias in the way we construct an African university are worth critical investigation.

# Review

## Uma Dhupelia Mesthrie

*Academic Mothers.* Venitha Pillay. Pretoria and Stroke on Trent: Unisa and Trentham Books, 2007.

The topic of Venitha Pillay's book is a welcome one. Few of us women who are academics and mothers speak publicly about what it means to juggle these two roles. For motherhood is not a topic raised readily at work; to talk about children and the home is almost not kosher. Speaking about the domestic space, one sometimes fears, may be to the detriment of one's intellectual image.

Pillay's book highlights some key issues that academic women face when pursuing both career and motherhood. She sets out her goals and methodology quite clearly. At the core of the book is what she calls the "perceived oppositional identities" of academic mothers. They are women engaged in intellectual work generally conceived as "rational, unemotional and logical", yet they are mothers, and with that comes "nurturing, loving, emotions and sensitivity" (Pillay, 2007: 1). So how do these two identities inhabit a being and how are they played out in daily life, at home and at work?

To answer the question, Pillay focused on three academic women and asked each to keep a diary, into which they poured their thoughts about the daily stresses of combining several roles. She also interviewed them, communicated by email, in corridors and even at meetings. She kept a research diary of all these communications herself. The women, named rather blandly and anonymously Ann, Sue and Sally, are all achievers at university: they have doctorates, publication goals, awards, post-doctoral projects and post-graduate students, and they attend international conferences. They are also mothers with very young children – infants and toddlers. They are all white.

Pillay defends her decision to interview these white women. She argues that general research agendas are driven by whites studying blacks. She wanted to be "oppositional" (2007: 18). Furthermore, she did not want to complicate her sample by focusing on different races, as she "wanted to eliminate the external noises of race" in the discussion around motherhood and academia (2007: 19). Yet Pillay fails to explain why a sample of three would be adequate, or why she settled on three women from her own

institution. She discusses her perception of power relations between her and the subjects of her study in a polarised way that almost makes one cringe. She also makes generalisations about her subjects. Interestingly, in the fascinating epilogue, the women talk about what she has written. They did not see the power relations quite as Pillay did. The women's personalities, intelligence and their motivations are powerfully present in this epilogue and it is this chapter that makes the book worthwhile and gives it strength.

Pillay devotes one chapter to each mother and then brings together all three stories, making the crucial links and connections. This she does fairly well. From these stories, we learn about difficult choices the women had to make while their children were young. Should they go to an international conference or forsake this? Should they take a sabbatical in a foreign country or not? How are the daily stresses of motherhood managed? It is interesting to learn how the conflicts are resolved – some take their babies with them, others find alternate caregivers or rely on their partners. There were no easy solutions. Each had some drawback. What is common to all the stories are the feelings of guilt and the constant attempts to find a balance.

Pillay's conclusions are interesting and forceful (2007: 141). She argues that it is futile to seek that balance that most women try to accomplish. Not one of her subjects felt the calm of the successful balancing act – it simply can not be achieved and should not be seen as a goal, she says. Guilt over perceived failure as mothers, she argues, is “externally created and internally reinforced”. Her answer to the dilemmas that women academics face as mothers is to challenge “the socially constructed notion that mothers are responsible for nurturing”. This would do a lot to get rid of ever-pervasive guilt and would be liberating for fathers as well as children. She argues strongly for a banishment of the “two lives” approach that many women take. “Academic mothers”, she argues, “need to recreate thinking in ways that inscribe mother and academic into a sense of wholeness” (2007: 11).

While Pillay makes these arguments well, she is less successful in demonstrating how “motherhood is implicated in intellectual work” – the intertwining of the personal and the intellectual – a key aim of her book (2007: 1). Her subjects were themselves not able to relate to this point, though they did reveal that motherhood influenced how they related to students facing similar stresses.

I also think that the nature of academic work could have been given due attention by the author. What distinguishes academic work from other work?

How are women lecturers at a university different from women lawyers and women doctors, for instance? The stories do provide an idea of the nature of academic work as told by the women themselves but the author could have provided some key analysis around this.

The early chapters of the book are written in a tone that jars, but the book gets better and the epilogue effectively provides a debate among the participants in this project. The book is welcome for opening debate over motherhood in academia.



# Review

Sheila Meintjes

*Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority.* Shireen Hassim. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006; and

*Representation Et Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape, 1949-1976.* Helen Scanlon. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2007.

Shireen Hassim begins her important study on the political participation of women in the struggle against “one of the vilest regimes in history”, South Africa’s system of apartheid, with a quotation from Chantal Mouffe, “Feminist politics should be understood not as a separate form of politics designed to pursue the interests of women as women, but rather the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands... Feminism ... is the struggle for the equality of women... against the multiple forms in which the category ‘woman’ is constructed in subordination.” This forms the framework with which Hassim addresses the South African women’s movement during the period of heightened struggle of the 1980s, and the transition to democracy in the 1990s. She shows that the women’s movement was not a single organisation, but a heterogeneous movement, a *strong social movement*, able to articulate its interests through its diverse constituencies, mobilise them, and “develop independent strategies to achieve its aims while holding open the possibility of alliance with other progressive movements”.

Hassim’s study is a brilliantly crafted and powerful political analysis, the most detailed and comprehensive published since Cheryl Walker’s 1982 study of the earlier struggles of women in the 1950s and 1960s. It is deservedly the winner of the American Political Science Association’s best book on Women in Politics for 2006. It addresses both the intersection of different feminist approaches within the women’s movement and the movement’s political engagement with the broader struggles for citizenship and freedom from oppression in South Africa. Hassim shows how the South African women’s movement historically moves between a “feminine approach” that addresses the “cultural experiences of

gender and the everyday struggles of poor families and communities to survive” and a “feminist approach”, which essentially challenges conventional gender roles and gendered hierarchies, both within social and political movements and in society. Both were features of women’s organisation and were incorporated within nationalist struggles. Theoretically, her study deepens our understanding of how alliances with nationalist power brokers have often led to an increasingly inclusionary elitist politics, while more transformative approaches allied to social movements sometimes confronted nationalist movements, the effect of which was to marginalise women’s concerns. Hassim’s analysis seeks to understand the gains and the political losses for the women’s movement in the transition to democracy in South Africa, to explore what was possible and whether the political choices it made enabled the women’s movement to “pursue its self-defined goals to remove gender inequalities and transform the conditions of life of the most vulnerable groups of women”.

A *sine qua non* of feminist thinking has been the importance of autonomy for women’s organisation. In her introduction, Hassim draws on Maxine Molyneux’s insightful work to argue that autonomy is less valued in post-colonial societies than in the West, precisely because women’s political activism is embedded within broader struggles for national liberation or social transformation. This context – changing over time – forms a critical factor in determining the opportunities and constraints for advancing women’s political goals of gender equality at different moments. Women’s independent organisation need not necessarily advance women’s interests, while alliances, “associational autonomy”, might be more strategic in promoting equality. A third form of organisation, from above, which Hassim calls “directed collective action”, may or may not promote gender equality. Through finely wrought empirical research in Chapters Two to Four, Hassim develops her theoretical insights. She addresses the issue of “associational autonomy” through a detailed analysis of three anti-apartheid women’s organisations in the Cape, Natal and the Transvaal. She then turns to the ANC Women’s Section in exile as an example of “directed collective action”. The Women’s National Coalition, which emerged in the transition to democracy, constitutes an example of an independent, autonomous organisation.

The transition created a new political opportunity structure in which not only did new opportunities for women to redefine themselves as a political constituency emerge, but a “discursive space” opened for women’s movements to redefine goals and priorities. At the same time, though,

she shows that these possibilities were in turn determined by what she calls ‘the universe of political discourse’. In Chapter Five, the relationship between nationalist discourse and women’s liberation is put under the microscope – Hassim asks, “were they congruent, and in what ways?” She argues cogently that nationalism was something of a “master narrative” that established “boundaries to women’s agency” in terms of collective action. She critically engages with a range of South African feminist discussions and acknowledges the “seething” undercurrents of debate about the “nature of feminist practice” within the women’s movement that she interprets as “an indigenous feminism”. Her analysis moves towards a recognition that in postcolonial contexts, the boundaries between women’s movements, feminism and nationalism can only be understood in the context of the contest between them. She probes the way in which women’s interests in South Africa were defined, how race and class intersected in the debates, and how the polarisation of “rights and needs” tend to obfuscate the way gender politics has brought the two together.

Nevertheless, in her more empirical analysis, Hassim’s research points to the “politicisation of traditional roles” as “part of a revolutionary nationalism in which woman, mother and nation were part of a continuous discourse”. Grassroots organisations articulated the desire for change in gender power relations in the private realm, which pierced the conventional scope of formal politics to bring a transformative agenda into the political arena. What she shows, though, is that when women leaders were pulled out of the women’s organisations in their affiliation to the United Democratic Front, this weakened the capacity of the movement to hold together organisationally. By the end of the 1980s, women’s issues may have become subsumed and even sidelined in the broader struggle; certainly the movement itself was in decline, but the discourse of gender equality and women’s autonomy had surfaced. The internal debates in South Africa had influenced the ANC in exile, and a younger, more radical generation of women brought women’s liberation and nationalism into conversation. Hassim’s chapter on the ANC in exile offers a unique study of the gender struggles in the movement. In particular she shows how militarism tended to trump any feminist project in the hegemony of the idea of the “armed struggle as the bedrock of the ANC vision of the revolution”.

So how then did feminist thinking and the commitment to gender equality become such a distinctive aspect of the South African transition when conditions seemed so antithetical? Hassim carefully traces the changes in the

political opportunity structure from the early and mid-1980s, both in South Africa and internationally. She argues that the transition was the catalyst for the creation of an autonomous organisation in the context of an earlier history of women's organisation, which provided scope for the articulation of a women's agenda outside the ANC. But more critically, she suggests that the nature of the transition allowed for a new democratic discourse to take centre stage. Her chapter on the transition brings fascinating new material to light about the internal conflicts and negotiations within the WNC about its political practice and goals. She details the contest of ensuring women's presence both in the final constitution making process and in the development of an "interest-based women's politics". The WNC did not survive the transition, partly because it "never developed a coherent sense of long-term purpose". But in the end, the political compromise of acknowledging and including women, by accommodating their formal demands for institutional mechanisms and an equality clause, were incremental gains – easy victories that did not translate into real power. Instead, women's gains were used as "political collateral" that tended to undermine real transformative change.

The final chapters of the book deal with the strategic shift from negotiating the terms of women's political integration to those of engaging the state, and the accountability of women politicians to a somewhat diffuse women's movement. The formation of the national gender machinery and institutionalisation of promoting gender equality is also put under the spotlight. Hassim's research traces the complex process of "interest group politics" and constituency building, which led to increased representation with the possibility of "shifts in the allocation of resources to address women's needs". She calls this a "virtuous political circle". Debates for and against quotas and group (i.e. women's) representation are discussed. A focus on numerical representation can evade more important issues of accountability, argues Hassim. This can be compounded by the form of electoral system, as in the proportional system, which she argues (and her evidence shows) promotes greater party centralism, and even male domination. Not because women's numerical representation is enhanced, but because men remain the power brokers. Hassim thus points to the ambivalence and ambiguity of women's involvement in both party and representative politics. Through analysis of policy and legislative changes that would challenge male domination, Hassim shows how intractable change can be. Yet women form the majority of voters. The solution, she strongly suggests, is for an autonomous women's

movement to pressurise effective and accountable women decision-makers. All feminists should heed this advice.

In a different vein, the book by Helen Scanlon, *Representation & Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976*, takes us into the personal realm and lived experience of politically-active women during the construction of the apartheid state in one region, the Western Cape. The unique nature of the local state, where apartheid tried to create a "Coloured Preference Area" that made African black people "third class" citizens, is germane to understanding the intersection of race, class and gender in this part of the world during the period under review. This is a beautifully-written political history that, through both organisational histories and a personal-narrative approach, explores how the intersection of the intimate and the personal with the everyday issues that shape women's lives, such as rents, wages, housing and food, can catapult women into political activism and organisation. Apartheid's race and class policies meant that for women "being simply domestic" became intensely political.

The book addresses four theses. The first questions the boundaries of what we understand as "the political". Scanlon shows, through a critique of different scholarly attempts to characterise women's political engagement, that we need to explore women's aims and aspirations "within a severely constrained socio-economic context" in new ways. The link between formal politics and personal life grew within (and out of) "distinctively female cultures". In particular, and this is the second thesis, women's engagement occurred within particular competitive and divisive contexts. While the personal became politicised, much of the emphasis was on local issues. It was often, too, "competition for men's attention" that often divided women and prevented them from organising collectively to "fight for a better deal". The third thesis engages with the critical ethical and methodological questions related to writing about the personal and the political. How can researchers mitigate what critics have identified as the thorny issue of "the sovereign position of the academic" in interpreting the lives of others? Scanlon navigates the complex contentions with empathy and deep respect for her subjects.

The fourth thesis Scanlon identifies relates to the question of *whose* lives become the focus of historical analysis and understanding. Because of the androcentric nature of power, women have been significantly marginalised, as Scanlon notes. She explains that this has led to an organisational bias and a focus on the lives of "important" women, where some of the evidence

constructs what she calls “a kind of authorised version of the past”. Less prominent women “brought different and new information to light”. Even so, with the passage of time and the death of politically active women, the experience (particularly of politically active black, working class women) goes unrecorded. History is full of gaps. Her study is an attempt to address “the anonymity that shrouds so many women activists”.

Scanlon weaves personal narratives into the broader context of political developments in the Western Cape, including the different ideological options available through the formation of contending and quite sectarian political organisations. Her study of organisation becomes intertwined with personal biographies in the first five chapters of her book. Through deeply personal stories of women’s lives, Scanlon introduces the gendered effects of apartheid’s constructions – influx control and the Coloured Labour Preference policy saw families attempting to preserve and reconstruct themselves in the face of police harassment and imprisonment. The intensely personal characterisation of lived relations in this period of apartheid engineering provides a new set of graphic, discursive understandings of how people constructed their lives and how they engaged in national politics. African women lived “as guerillas wandering from one squatting site to another as they dodged the police”. This at least provided the necessary conditions for engagement in a broader politics. The specificity of women’s responsibilities shaped women’s political agency in particular ways, says Scanlon, and tended “to justify untraditional public militancy”. So we begin to see and understand how someone like activist Dorothy Zihlangu was motivated to become involved in politics through her experience of discrimination in the Salt River market.

Scanlon shows how local politics brought a range of somewhat odd alliances into play. White liberal women like Eulalie Stott, privileged, disconnected from party politics but concerned with people’s rights, liberties and welfare, were drawn into politics through their moral abhorrence of the new system. The National Council of Women and the Black Sash rub shoulders with the Federation of South African Women and other more transient organizations. Yet “strategies for survival”, the title of the fifth chapter of the book, led women into a range of voluntary formations that reflected “the social reorganisation” of women, but also by them. So Scanlon shows how class position, race, age and ideology over-determined the role, activities and position of different kinds of organisations.

In the final chapters of the book, Scanlon presents the portraits of two

women from each race group whose experiences and ideologies differ, one from the other. The first chapter deals with two white women; Ray Alexander, a committed communist, and Eulalie Stott, a committed liberal, both of whom engaged in opposition to new apartheid policies in different ways and influenced the direction of radical and liberal opposition. Alexander, a Latvian Jewish immigrant, immediately joined the Communist Party on her arrival in South Africa as a fifteen-year-old and began “organising the unorganised”. Her socialist identity predominated. She was to have a profound impact not only on the trade union movement, but also by engaging with women’s organisations promoting women’s rights and the vote. Her ideological role in the Federation of South African Women in promoting a feminist position (before such a position had a name in South Africa) contrasted with the tensions between her personal, familial relationships and political commitments. Eulalie Stott evinced strong reactions – opinionated, “a champion nerve-getter”, but Scanlon paints a complex picture of a dedicated, generous and moral woman, whose membership of the Black Sash radicalised her but in a “maternalist” direction – while her participation in the politics of the Cape Town City Council simultaneously drove her in a conservative direction.

The stories of Dora Tamana and Mildred Ramakaba Lesiea capture the changing contexts within which political consciousness emerged among middle-class and working-class African women activists. The pragmatism and self-help of the first contrasted with the more difficult and desperate conditions of the second, despite the fact that both women were equally affected by the discrimination against Africans in the predominantly “coloured” Western Cape. Scanlon’s accounts of Elizabeth van der Heyden and Elizabeth Abrahams’ stories capture the very different material, political and intellectual context of so-called “coloured” women’s lives. Van der Heyden was a schoolteacher whose political education began in the radical Unity Movement, but moved into an organisation called the National Liberation Front, based on a cell structure of revolutionary study groups and thinking. Revolutionary thinking alone defined both Van der Heyden’s intellectual and non-racial identity, and was the cause of a ten-year jail sentence for fomenting “violence and subversion”. Trade union politics linked to women’s responsibility for bread-and-butter issues were the stuff of Abrahams’ activism, which led to her banning.

Scanlon concludes that biography and personal narratives “illuminate the variety of experiences of women”. Above all, they provide an understanding of individual motivations for women’s politicisation and mobilisation, “stripping

away the anonymity of the many” to show how changing consciousness is often more important than inherited characteristics. The influence of family, an environment of debate, of early migration, of privilege and education as well as ideological commitment were all important in shaping women’s impetus to political activism. But the costs were enormous – “We really didn’t have our own lives,” remarked activist Rebecca Lan.

Both of these books provide very different ways of interpreting the gendered history of different periods of South Africa’s apartheid past and its transition to democracy. The “personal is political” theme remains pertinent, and both books in their own way show how we cannot afford *not* to engage with the unfinished business of the struggle for freedom and non-racialism in South Africa. Both books are required reading for a new interpretation of South Africa’s past and for a new way of thinking about how we, as feminist intellectuals, might engage our political energies.

# Review

Teresa Barnes

*Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers.* Nomboniso Gasa, ed. 2007. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

The combination of state funding with a history project often produces truly awful results: narrow, pompous hagiography, awash with airbrushing. How refreshing to find a project and resulting volume that have none of these attributes. According to the editor, this book was the brainchild of the then-Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture, Brigitte Mabandla, was funded by the ministry, and was meant to be produced for the official celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March. Gasa's introduction is resignedly apologetic about the fact that the book was not, in fact, ready in March 2006. For those of us not wedded to specific output dates, however, this scarcely matters. *Women in South African History* brings together a rich, challenging and significant group of essays by leading social scientists and social activists who (with two exceptions) are based in South Africa. It should be on the bookshelf of everyone teaching and researching South African history. If every university history student in this country had a copy, it would be even better.

Can the historical experiences of women be captured in the historical categories that have been dominated by the images and preoccupations of men? Are there sufficient commonalities across time, space and race for the category "woman" to have meaning? How dependent are historians becoming on the quest to find "agency" in women's lives? Questions like these are stimulated by reading any and all of the 18 chapters of this book – and this is to its credit. Sometimes edgy, sometimes provocative, sometimes deliberately over-the-top – these are no bedtime, sleep-inducing stories. It is also worth noting that the book comprises histories of a range of ethnicities and races (although interestingly, Indian women's experiences do not specifically feature); and authorship is more racially representative than one finds in many edited collections on South African history; six of the chapters are written by black women. At a time when some are announcing the virtual end of the historical profession in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> these essays demonstrate

that out here on the margins, though admittedly still in a precarious position, history is doing fairly well.

Gasa's introduction to the volume makes it clear that the contributors were not required to adopt any one tone or theoretical canon. She writes openly of having to embrace concepts of ambiguity and contingency in order to bring the essays together under one roof. Each chapter must therefore be read in its own conceptual context.

Jennifer Weir's chapter on, chiefly, women and women in leadership in pre-colonial Africa could have been one of those shallow, dry recitations of facts about Queen this followed by Queen that. Thankfully, Weir takes her task to be the conceptualisation of women as leaders and the presentation of the little that we know about how men might have selectively incorporated symbols and discourses of feminine-defined social power into their ruling repertoires. Weir also forces us to look again at what we do know about women in the pre-colonial period. For example, was the extended mourning period indulged in by Shaka in Zululand in the early 19th century on the death of his mother a sign of his emotional immaturity, or of her high social standing? Did she have a role in decision-making, and if so what was it? Or, what happens to our understandings of rural society and architecture if the homestead is seen as a set of structures where co-wives lived and worked together in a woman-dominated community rather than as a harem huddled around a patriarch? Undergraduate students will especially enjoy the mental *frisson* that is produced by Weir's turning such received categorisations on their heads.

Pumla Gqola's chapter on slave women's subjectivity forces the reader to think carefully about choice, agency and voice in history. Although they were officially denied all three of these means of expression, Gqola argues that innovative feminist/womanist readings of the sources – such as Gabeba Baderoon's work on Malay cookbooks – allows us to begin to hear traces of stories of “survival, subversion, resistance, isolation, innovation and other modes” of slave women (2007: 38). How then does one theorise the dialectic between slave women's acquiescence and agency? As their learning to speak, in a phrase Gqola borrows from US scholar David Dabydeen, “three languages in one mouth”?

About ten years ago, Helen Bradford's work on the tragic events and processes in Xhosaland in the mid-18th century blew conventional, androcentric “frontier history” decisively out of the water. Here, she employs a much fuller palette than historians usually use, in trying to explain both the larger and smaller contexts of the world of Nonqawuse, millenarian prophetess, of the 1850s. Bradford departs

into art, literature and poetry, and reads the androcentric sources conclusively against the grain in order to argue that the Nonqawuse episode was exactly that: an episode in a series of bitter struggles for understanding, land and resources over the course of many decades – rather than, as has been portrayed, a single chain of events precipitated by the individualist ravings of one lone, misfit teenager. Historians would do well to ponder whether Bradford’s widening of both the historical source base and of the actual linguistics of historiography are requisite for the conception and production of a new generation of historical work. This is a “must-read” chapter. I only hope that academic historians will find it in this book, which will probably have a more limited circulation than digitally-available and -indexed journal articles.

In the middle section of the book, Luli Callinicos and Iris Berger present textured updates of their main bodies of work on migrants and women trade unionists, respectively. Berger’s chapter and Pat Gibbs’ focused study on labour-oriented organisations in the Port Elizabeth area fit together nicely. In her critique of the political historiography of African women, Nomboniso Gasa takes strong exception to the idea that defence of the family under apartheid from a motherist position was a conservative choice.

The third section, on armed and mass struggles, is one of the book’s important contributions. Deconstructing war and violence as male-only pursuits has been a great achievement of feminist history, and here Raymond Suttner, Jacklyn Cock, Janet Cherry and Pat Gibbs examine a range of ways in which organised violence was a woman’s experience in South Africa in the pre-1994 period. Somewhat short on empirical data, Suttner’s chapter is mainly a cry for further research into the ways in which the ANC’s exiles participated in clandestine activity along (or not along) gendered lines. Cherry takes some issue with the idea of sidelined women in urban struggles, and chronicles “some of the varied ways in which women did participate: as leaders, as organisers, as activists, as aggressors and as defenders” (2007: 312).

Finally, the collection moves into the post-1994 era with examinations of women’s struggles to do with land, housing, disease and knowledge. The strongest chapter here is Nthabiseng Motsemme’s thoroughly-researched piece on the ways in which young urban women negotiate, understand, speak and act out their inner lives in spaces which surround them with multiple insecurities. Motsemme is especially clear that violence in these young women’s lives is not an event; it is like water in which they are forced to swim. It has shaped their very lives and it does not simply appear and disappear;

it is an integral aspect of their pasts, present and futures, and their choices for life and love cannot be understood without considering it.

Over the past 15 years, Sheila Meintjes has written about and produced a short film on the protests of homeless women in Dobsonville, Soweto in 1990. Here, she relates the protests to the wider contexts of housing struggles by civil society organisations and the women's movement. This is a particularly tricky task since the Dobsonville women demonstrated their desperation and contempt by protesting naked in front of the police. Their embodiment – literally – is difficult to interpret and to represent sensitively. In this piece, Meintjes gives the protests a non-sensationalist rendering.

The final piece in the book, by Yvette Abrahams, presents a deeply illuminating exploration and reflection on the necessarily complex positioning of a feminist researcher/writer/historian in contemporary South Africa. This chapter is a longer, fuller version of a chapter published under the same title in *Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy* edited by Reitumetse Mabokela and Zine Magubane (Unisa Press, 2004). In both, Abrahams argues that the historic abuse of a Khoekhoe woman in the 18th century still resonates with ambiguities and complexities in the 21st. Her task is to think about how to write the moral history of a degraded subject in such a way that colonial epistemology is not reinscribed on her own body. This question lies at the sharp edge of feminist historiographical practice and will confront us for a long time to come.

*Women in South African History* is supplied with a CD containing searchable PDF files of the entire text, which are also available for download, free, from the Human Sciences Research Council Press, publishers of the book, at [www.hsrcpress.ac.za](http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za).

I hope the HSRC will work very hard to give this book the market it deserves. *Women in South African History* should be widely read and used in South African universities and beyond.

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Hans Erik Stolten. ed. *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007.

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## Call for papers

*Feminist Africa 11: Researching for life: knowledge production for feminist activism*

Co-edited by Jane Bennett and Amina Mama

A key challenge for African feminists remains the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse, complex contexts in which we live and work, and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action. Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its own right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers and writers. FA11 will explore the history of research methodologies drawn upon by two decades of feminist work on the African continent, and ask questions about the experience of developing research which engages the realities of our contexts, including:

- multilingualism;
- challenges of access and gatekeeping;
- the impact of conflict and violence on the meaning of research;
- the experience of engaging with researching the “hidden”, the “private”, and the “taboo”.

Contributions are invited which aim to revitalise theoretical and political debate on questions of “feminist research methodologies” and which highlight the ingenuities and creativity of the work of research in under-resourced, sometimes unpopular, and ultimately critical zones of concern.

Please email the editors at [agi-feministafrica@uct.ac.za](mailto:agi-feministafrica@uct.ac.za) to indicate your interest (i.e. feature article, standpoint, profile of activism, or book review). All submissions need to be in by the end of April 2008.