
Edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi, *African Gender Studies: A Reader* features twenty-two classic and newly-minted multidisciplinary essays that explore the epistemological and ideological challenges of theorizing gender in reference to Africa.

The first section, cleverly titled: “Transcending the Body of Knowledge”, seeks to redress the undue emphasis on the corporal in interpretations of gender. The opening chapter is taken from Oyewumi’s provocative book: *The Invention of Women*, the main argument of which is also the premise of this edited volume: that theorizing about gender is essentially an epistemological undertaking. Oyewumi aims to disturb the situation where research on gender in Africa takes its cues from the West in terms of theoretical concerns, concepts, problematics and methodology. Specifically, the chapter debunks the myth that “biology is destiny” (p. 3). Akyeampong and Obeng follow this up appropriately with a discussion of the metaphysical dimensions of gender, demonstrating how gender can take on different properties in the alchemy of power.

The section on “Decolonizing Feminisms” questions the assumptions underpinning the feminist theoretical and political movement. The essays draw attention to the irony that feminism pushes a global agenda of liberation and sisterhood on the back of imperialist constructions of women. Marnia Lazreg goes so far as to problematise the widely used category “women of color”, questioning whether it is not a false solidarity that rests on identities prescribed and proscribed by Western notions of race. The question that the writers grapple with in this section is how gender can be conceptualized to allow for difference and yet provide a basis for connections.

What follows are examples of works that aspire to replace universalist notions of womanhood with alternative theoretical and empirical perspectives. For instance, the chapters in “Reconceptualizing Gender” offer interesting perspectives on the foundational societal institutions of marriage and family. Busia, Fall, Gadzekpo and Zeleza are among those who attempt to (re)gender memory in “Gender Biases in the Making of History” and “Writing Women: Reading Gender”.

Gender from an African Perspective

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A book that offers an African perspective on gender would hardly be complete without some discussion of the intersection of gender and development. With the ubiquity of gender in development-speak also comes obfuscation that hinders research and action. The “Development and Social Transformation” section highlights the disconnect between the notion of empowerment through/for development and the pathological representations of women in the development literature. Another challenge that is identified in this section is how gender studies might not simply be used in the service of pre-determined development agendas, but can be the basis of actual transformation of gender relations.

Despite the calls for alternative paradigms, it can be difficult to break out of the development mold, as the chapter by Banoum illustrates. The piece showcases the agency of female participants in a development project. While an uplifting representation of women, it lacks an analysis of the specific operational ideas of gender that were employed in the project. Banoum speaks vaguely of processes and principles based on “ancestral culture” on the one hand, but then states that the women strove to overcome “social customs” and other traditions. The point is made elsewhere in the section that we cannot know what gender means unless it is put in social, cultural, political and historical contexts. Pala, in a brief intervention, underscores the dynamism of women’s locations, which suggests the need to perceive structures at local and international levels that position women in particular ways, and to explore women’s own movements of resistance and adaptation. She provides some pointers for such an undertaking, as well as an extensive bibliography, presumably for those that would take up the challenge.

This collection of work proves that there is already rich analytical and conceptual knowledge on gender coming from an African perspective. Why then is gender still problematic in the context of work on/about the African continent? The final section, “Critical Conversations”, provides insight into the reasons for such disengagement between research priorities and research carried out; between available knowledge and the way that knowledge is deployed.

Desiree Lewis locates the problem in the fact that gender research on the continent is overdetermined by a functionalist anthropology and developmentalist orientations which limit the range of possible discourses on gender. According to her, the anthropological perspective relies on fixed and simplistic binaries that are developed in opposition to Western identities. This is especially true when “culture” is evoked as the evidence or origins of difference in a way that obscures important internal structures. This appears to be the thrust of Nkiru Nzegwu’s response to a chapter from Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House*, in which Appiah discusses a family dispute around his father’s burial. Nzegwu contends that Appiah’s account superimposes one (Western) tradition of family on the Asante matrilineal system, and in a way that distorts a culture that Appiah attempts to mediate for his audience.

Secondly, Lewis identifies a developmentalist dominance which reveals itself in a technocratic approach to women’s lives that is driven by donor and state agencies. The resulting overemphasis on policy-making, Lewis argues, is to the detriment of “radical” and innovative intellectual engagement with gender. At the same time, policymaking on gender is inconsistent, fragmented and incoherent. Lewis’ critique, in effect, is that the state

has monopolised gender because of its control of resources and discourses. Yet, it is not moving progressively on the question of gender because of a lack of vision of what a holistic, long-term gender transformation of society should look like and how it might be achieved. The consequence is the cooptation of research into predetermined development agenda, and the reduction of discussions of gender to narrowly delineated “gender issues”.

Where Lewis is concerned with what is published and how it is taken up, Godwin Murunga calls attention to how the very process of producing and disseminating knowledge is fundamentally gendered. Through a review of three books, Murunga critically assesses the race and gender fault lines in academic publishing and uncovers the systemic influences that work to exclude women.

The purpose of the reader is clearly stated at the outset: “Taking Africa seriously, it represents part of the effort to correct the longstanding problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities” (p. xiv). Oyewumi signals this political act in the dedication of the book to Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai “who taught us that in order to make change, we must take charge”. Beyond this, the book does not attempt to push a particular disciplinary, theoretical or methodological perspective. The volume includes works by women and men in different disciplinary, national and residential locations. There are review essays, survey essays, evaluative work, and life histories. There are varying emphases on gender as concept and as lived experience; and on conceptual analysis and solution-seeking.

What is noteworthy about this collection is the contiguity of ideas even while there is no attempt at a forced consensus. (And in fact, a book that critiques essentialising notions of womanhood should not be in danger of committing such an error.) This volume clearly shows that despite a unified purpose in representing Africa, we should not be afraid of rigorous debate. It is evident that more conversation needs to happen if we are to move African gender studies forward. The *African Gender Studies* reader is an excellent jumping off point.

