

Bridging the Research-Praxis Divide in Feminist Methodologies: A WORDOC Model

Introduction

As a graduate of the Higher Education Leadership Institute, my scholarly and administrative engagements have received a boost, so I am grateful for the opportunity to attend my first CODESRIA Gender Institute meeting which coincides with the CODESRIA at 50 celebrations.

In 2017, when I assumed office as Coordinator of Women's Research and Documentation Center (WORDOC) at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, I took time to run through the files of the then 30-year-old Centre. I began seeking answers to the following questions which I believe are key to conversations on feminist methodology:

1. How has feminist research been conducted?
2. What are the methods that have been used/ or are being used?
3. Have the methods led to the desired epistemic rupture/ or what I describe as 'intellectual orgasm'?

The first thing I noticed was that my predecessors were writing practice into research and bringing research into praxis. The works of Bolanle Awe, La Ray Denzer, Nina Mba and Abiola Odejide, among others, opened a pathway for my feminist methodological sojourn. It is that journey that

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came to mind when I was asked to discuss feminist methodologies at the CODESRIA at 50 celebration which also marked the gathering of the 28th CODESRIA Gender Institute gathering.

The dearth of women's experiences in the academy and scholarship was a concern to researchers as far back as the 1970s. More worrisome was what Salo (2003: 5) described as the 'perpetual deafness' of the social sciences which allowed male-centric curriculum to pervade academic disciplines. This necessitated the need to 'write women' into scholarships and disciplines, so that courses focusing on women were created and introduced across academic departments. This initial step signalled feminist thinking as the underlying tool for identifying and ending all forms of discrimination against women. The efforts of organisations such as Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), African Gender Institute (AGI) and Network of Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN) attest to this. As they progressed in the venture, seeking to establish women's

studies centres in institutions across the continent, patriarchal structures altered their aspirations, forcing a shift to 'gender' as against 'feminist' scholarship. Perhaps androcentric methodological flaws which presented feminism in a questionable light also contributed to that shift which then gave preference to gender research in the academy. Although feminism was meant to serve a different objective – spotlighting women's oppression, and challenging norms and structures that perpetuate this oppression – the turn to 'gender' as an entry point became a survival strategy that allowed scholars to encounter and engage feminism mainly in the process of studying gender. Through it all, methodology issues have remained in the forefront of gender scholarship, that is, seeking to define inclusion and exclusion criteria, methods and designs that could be generally accepted in conducting gender-conscious research.

Methodology is broadly understood as an analysis of how research should be conducted. Harding (1987) notes how methodologies are often confused with epistemologies, theories of knowledge, and research methods, which are the actual tools used to carry out research. Furthermore, research methodology has revolved largely around the use of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods for approaching studies,

clarifying what type of data should be collected, from whom, and how it should be analysed. However, methodological discourses are not valuable on their own; they must also focus on the practicability, systematic nature and universal acceptability of pathways that justify what is claimed to be knowledge.

From Gender Methodologies to Feminist Methodologies

Recent developments in gender studies, including its extension into sexualities, have both expanded and complicated the terrains of enquiry. The politics of difference and policies on gender across the continents have raised debate which affects society, as well as also scholarship, advocacy and activism. Pathways explored in the recent past include Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender and Development (GAD), Gender Mainstreaming (GM), Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), and Gender Equality, Empowerment of Women and Social Inclusion (GEESI). These frameworks affirm that specific methods or combination of methods may be used to approach, study and understand the complex nature of gender. Still, as gender constructions, ideations and reformulations progress, conceptualising and understanding the myriad challenges that women experience, attendant complexities have necessitated an urgency for specificity in focus and consequently the prioritisation of feminist thinking. Accordingly, the turn of institutions to feminist methodologies may be described as a coming back to the initial starting point and a departure from gender reasonings which have carried additional baggage, hindering

women from walking towards their desired destination. One might then ask what a re-emphasis of feminist methodologies would be contributing to research in the social sciences and humanities.

Currently deployed in academia are feminist methods such as Intersectionality, Embodiment, Standpoint, Relationality, Positionality, Reflexivity and so on. We should also not forget Womanism, Motherism, Nego-feminism, Stiwanism and how they connect to feminist methodologies. With these in mind, the first time I tried to write a feminist article using human hair to theorise the material, reviewers' rejection did not permit the article to see the light of day. It was my first experience of the methodological melee I must contend with, and informed my quest to identify what is expected to change when we shift from 'gender' to 'feminist' methodologies.

Here, I propose a reasoning that adopts feminism itself as the methodology, comprising of ideas, concepts, theories and critical analysis of lived experiences. Within this approach, I present a practical model by arguing that what the embrace of feminist methodologies could contribute to research is a holistic agenda encompassing writing women into research, connecting research with action, and fashioning platforms for advocating for change. Using feminist methodologies, hitherto unreadable contexts can become decipherable, enabling them to be subjected to the test of praxis so that parity and knowledge gaps can be closed in good time. This turn towards feminist methodologies is an intentional attempt to reclaim feminism.

Content and Contexts of Feminist Methodologies

Despite conceptual breakthroughs and the notable progress made by gender research in Africa, political will to implement feminist programmes remain low or absent. Contributing to this is a wobbly researcher-civil society-grassroots link. With the prevalent gender methodologies, the end was sidelined while the means was romanticised. My argument here is that methodologies have stayed for too long within the confines of the academy. Research fields have remained a space to harvest data, yet we often write the data into studies without returning to the field to see to how findings may trigger the desired change.

In the words of Jane Bennet:

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

To address this, Mama (2011) puts forward three approaches: (1) research on activism, (2) research by activists, and (3) research for activism. While these three are laudable, the know-how for achieving their goals vary. Sadly, the academia seems to have majored in (1) – research on activism – leaving (2) and (3) behind.

Since feminism is an amalgam of ideologies, research, activism, connecting ideas, experiences, and realities, it is also expected to draw from the actual day-to-day practices of groups of people who have traditionally been excluded from the production of academic

knowledge. A major contribution that feminist methodologies bring to scholarship is a content-context nexus, which consequently becomes the continuum encompassing researchers, development practitioners and the 'data mines' which were initially separated from other stakeholders.

An embrace of feminist methodologies would mean codifying, for example, what the fabrics say; what weaving implies; how we connect the rhythms and lyrics of songs; why culinary matters matter in discourses of women's rights, health, economics, politics; and so on. What would constitute feminist ethnography, digital feminism, feminist philosophy, among others? This implies attempts to create and recognise different entry points into systems beyond the pages of journals and books. Further to these, how may a grassroots woman be informed that she is feminist? How may translations of research allow for an appreciation of how respondents/ study participants feature in research and how the data obtained from them are utilised? How may the scourge of extraction and expulsion be curbed in research? How may feminist labour be captured and expressed so that it is performed with community understanding in a way that connects the woman on the street with feminism; an approach that translates online activism to offline actions?

I acknowledge that there are several roads into feminist methodological thinking, and present the WORDOC Model for Bridging the Research-Praxis Divide in Feminist Methodologies here as a contribution to the discussion. I call it the WORDOC Methodological Bridge-building

Model. The building blocks for this model include co-creation, mentoring, as well as protecting strategic stakeholder choices. Focused on writing people into research and research into people, the model accounts for reflexivity, narrative development, naming, shaming, theorising and ultimately decolonising.

The WORDOC Methodological Bridge-building Model

I enter the conversation by citing three of my works, all published in 2020:

1. 'Hairiness and Hairlessness (Omotoso 2020a) which explains that, in spite of their shared epistemic invisibility, there is a divide between elite women and grassroots communities;
2. 'When the Hairy Suffers Baldness' (Omotoso 2020b) which explains the how different categories of women are not heard, despite their visibility in spheres of influence, and
3. 'Acada-activism' (Omotoso 2020c) which expresses the havoc wreaked when history writes women in the academia out of the narratives of feminist struggles.

These three works encouraged synergies between the work of government and the masses, older and younger female academics, international development partners and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The combined effect of this 'symbiotic interactionism'¹ suffered a setback due to political instabilities of the mid-1990s as well as institutional challenges following the NGO-isation of feminist struggles, bifurcation of academia-civil society engagements, and the way feminist studies were shelved as

the work of development partners and grassroots research fields/ data mines went in different directions. The 2000s have marked the high point of the WORDOC Methodological Bridge-Building Model with her multi-stakeholder approach to research, teaching, training, and policy advocacy. Some examples of this work are presented below.

a. The WORDOC monthly seminar series is a platform to present emerging trends, feminist theories, research reports, and so on. We began to ponder on:

- i. How to promote research uptake and bring research study results to end-users in intersectional contexts. This space allows for communities outside the academy to critique theories, thereby transcending the tradition of those in academia 'speaking to ourselves'.
- ii. How to deal with reflexivity and positional distortions. This is where fundamental research issues are raised. For instance, would studies conducted by any researchers funded from the Global North still be valid when they describe their research participants in demeaning terms? This is where several research dilemmas are addressed from other stakeholders' points of view.

b. An Annual International Women's Day Celebration: this event brings elite women together to evaluate progress especially as they pertain to national issues:

- i. We provide space for conversations with policymakers.
- ii. We challenge technocratic fragmentations resulting from narrowly developed works on gender in Africa. For example, the 2022 edition was a reflection

meeting on strategies of engagement considering the five gender bills rejected by the Nigerian parliament. On other occasions, we call press conferences to discuss selected government policies and how they affect women.

c. An Annual International Day for Grassroots Women: this event brings women out of their usual environments into an academic environment to discuss pressing issues, research findings, and possibilities for collaboration.

- i. This event is an opportunity for hidden issues to be revealed, and grassroots voices to be amplified. In the 2019 edition, a grassroots participant expressed her dissatisfaction with the way reporting on children's basic education performance has changed. She argued that the absence of red pen marks on report cards have deprived non-literate parents of the ability to visually assess how their children are performing at school.
- ii. This event is an opportunity to engage with alternative, pragmatic methodologies. The standard practice of obtaining written consent from study participants was queried by certain grassroots community members who refuse to append their signatures on any document they cannot read, lest they ignorantly give up their property. When study participants refuse to fill out a consent form, claiming that their presence is sufficient to constitute consent, does the Institutional Review Board (IRB) format as we have accepted it work for our systems, or we need to adapt it? What would be the way forward when such conventional methodologies are challenged?
- iii. These women-only meetings also allow for women to express views on difficult socio-political

issues which they might not express at a mixed meeting. An edition dedicated to women in politics offered the crab syndrome analysis of barriers to middle-level female academic leadership in Nigeria (see Omotoso 2020d). Grassroots women met with the elite community to share views on why women do not vote for women candidates. They argued that women remove the ladders for other women when they reach the top, while men extend the ladders so that more women can rise.

- iv. These events seek indigenous knowledge remedies for social vices. At a session on the prevalence of domestic violence and child molestation, grassroots women shared long-established strategies to protect girls from rape and molestation. Colleagues agreed that information obtained from these meeting is often more detailed than information obtained in the field.

d. The Annual WORDOC Girls' Summit is a deliberate space where young girls are encouraged to take on feminist traditions. This is where WORDOC tests whether its methodology is underpinned by emotional intelligence, and it helps build a space for 'catch-them-young' feminist capacity building (see Omotoso and Ogbekor 2023).

Feminist methodologies beyond writing also entail being intentional about entering 'closed', 'sacred' spaces and seeking allies who can provide access to those spaces. Indeed, when methodologies are brought under scrutiny, unexpected findings may surface.

Conclusion

Feminist methodologies must be subjected to the test of praxis if parity and knowledge gaps are to be closed in good time.

Feminist methodologies capture teaching, research, and activism for change. Our turn towards feminist methodologies is an intentional attempt for us to reclaim feminism. Any feminist methodology should enable the analysis of power relations, engage with positionality, identify oppression, and ultimately re-position women by augmenting their status and promoting their well-being across spheres. For optimal results, feminist methodologies must also connect with the field and present the academy as plausible vehicle for achieving these goals. Consequently, for feminist research to challenge power and bring about the desired change at a quicker pace, feminist methodologies must recommit to bridging the research-praxis gap, where knowledge production rests on meanings and experiences. If we agree that it should be about co-creation, mentoring, strategic stakeholder choice, writing people into research and writing research into people, can CODESRIA create a framework of accountability on research-praxis breakthroughs?

Note

1. Symbiotic interactionism presupposes partnership and support to reduce the top-bottom divides between women. WORDOC studies have shown a steady growth of women into higher education leadership through conscious efforts based on cooperativism, peer mentoring and feminist solidarity, to increase women's representation and women's progression to senior management (see Oyelude and Omotoso 2019).

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