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Researching Gender Relations in Africa: Directions and Landmarks in Feminist Research Methodology

Josephine Ahikire*

Abstract

This article is a reflection on critical perspectives on researching gender relations. It is an overview of the landmarks in feminist methodology and the quest for greater inventiveness and sensibility in researching gender relations in Africa. Critical questions include: What milestones have been reached and why? What flaws do we need to correct and what will it take? The article was generated as part of feminist research methodology training at CODESRIA. It is designed to be a contribution to the ongoing African feminist conversation around the critical need for debunking colonial discourses and developmentalist buzzwords in researching gender relations, and the need for African realities to inform research and knowledge generation on gender relations on the continent.

Résumé

Cet article est une réflexion sur les perspectives déterminantes de la recherche sur les relations de genre. C'est un aperçu des points saillants de la méthodologie féministe et de la quête d'inventivité et de sensibilité dans la recherche sur les relations de genre en Afrique. Les questions essentielles sont notamment : Quels objectifs ont été atteints et pourquoi ? Quelles lacunes devront être corrigées et comment y parvenir ? Le présent article a été rédigé dans le cadre d'une formation à la méthodologie de recherche féministe au CODESRIA. Il est conçu comme une contribution à la conversation féministe africaine en cours sur la nécessité cruciale de démystifier les discours coloniaux et les mots développementalistes à la mode dans la recherche sur les relations de genre, et le besoin des réalités africaines pour informer la recherche et la génération de connaissances sur les relations de genre sur le continent.

* Associate Professor, PRINCIPAL, College of Humanities & Social Sciences (CHUSS) Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda / Honorary Professor, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. Email: ahikirejosephine@gmail.com; josephine.ahikire@mak.ac.ug

Introduction

In the 1980s Marjorie Mbilinyi observed that the academic field of women's studies was simply catching up with the policy-oriented applied research (POAR) trends and reliance on external funding that had been characteristic of social science in general in neo-colonial Africa (1984:291). Mbilinyi sought to highlight the fact that the general roll-out of women's studies at the time did not promise enough in the direction of rigorous questioning, with many efforts locked up in the integrationist mode of the Women in Development (WID) discourse (Ahikire 1994; Mama 1996). Hand in hand with a donor-driven agenda was an apparently detheorised and depoliticised body of knowledge threatening to become the sole representation of women's studies.

Writing in the 1990s, Amina Mama (1996) (http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/gender-studies/gws) documented the fact that women's studies in Africa had steadily gained strength as a growing number of indigenous scholars, and women in particular, became involved in studies of gender relations. Mama indicates that even though the study of gender relations was still largely dominated by philosophical, theoretical and methodological concerns emanating from Western constructions, there was a growing body of thought that could be seen to constitute African feminism. This observation indicated relative progress in the building of feminist knowledges by and for Africa.

In very specific ways, social research has today embraced the concept of gender as an important tool for social analysis. In contrast to the last three decades or so, when social science discourse was overtly blind to the gender variable, the current period shows that there is, in general, a tacit agreement that gender can no longer be ignored. As demonstrated by the ground-breaking volume, *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Imam, Mama & Sow 1997), there is at the same time increased legitimacy for a feminist critique. Indeed the feminist challenge in the field of knowledge has gained momentum on the global scale generally and in Africa specifically. Imam aptly asserts this rising legitimacy when she argues that:

> …a social science which does not acknowledge gender as an analytic category is an impoverished and distorted science, and cannot accurately explain social realities and hence cannot provide a way out of the present crisis in Africa (1997:2).

This article deals with the question of what feminist methodological questions are especially raised in the African context and aims to contribute to the intellectual and political project of building a feminist body of

thought that is grounded in, and responsive to, local conditions and peoples' struggles in Africa. This for instance, is part of what Tamale (2020) envisions as the ability to become fluent in our cultural systems, to cultivate critical consciousness thereby reclaiming our humanity.

Situating Feminist Methodology

Definitional questions may serve many purposes, one of which might be to pursue an exclusionary agenda: 'what it is not'. The question 'what is feminist methodology?' is instead inclusive, relating to what broad principles might guide feminist research. This question has been posed by feminists as well as anti-feminists. While those hostile to feminism (anti-feminists) will pose the question, in many cases, to ridicule and/or dismiss the knowledge produced through such methodologies, feminist scholars engage with the question to fulfil a specific intellectual and political project. In very broad terms, feminism is a movement and a set of beliefs that problematise gender inequality (DeVault 1996). Coming into the arena of knowledge at the level of critique, feminism has the double duty of challenging the patriarchal order in a fundamental way, particularly at the point of knowledge production, and of working to create solid alternative frameworks. In this sense, DeVault offers a good reminder that feminist methodology will not be found in some stable orthodoxy but rather in an evolving dialogue (1996:31).

In posing the famous question, 'Is there a feminist method?', Harding crystallised the debate on feminist methodology and sought to clearly articulate what feminist imperatives bring to social research. According to Harding, a research method is simply a technique for gathering evidence, whereas methodology is a much more rigorous arena, embracing theoretical and epistemological questions (1987:2). Taking this perspective, feminist research methodology is not just about the techniques used in the field on women or by women, to gather evidence, but rather the entire research process from the formulation of questions, the assumptions behind the different formulations, the interpretive and justificatory strategy, information tools and their use, as well as the manner of utilisation of that particular research output. This means, as has been argued by a number of scholars, that feminist methodology is not just a matter of adding women to the sample or to the research fraternity, although these aspects are part and parcel of the whole feminist challenge.

The feminist challenge goes further, requiring a retheorisation of what is being studied and why. It also includes addressing the manner in which

the intellectual and practical aspects of the research are executed and the specific location of women therein. This is the argument that feminists have made: we cannot afford to merely add women into traditional frameworks of knowledge because those very frameworks are based on misogynist notions, hence there is a need to deconstruct them and reconstruct new knowledges informed by feminist imperatives. Furthermore, feminism requires knowledge explicitly dedicated to the transformation of gender relations – the social configuration of maleness and femaleness across all spheres of life, and the implications for theory and practice. The fact that this knowledge has been historically ignored therefore brings up the issue of the need to deconstruct existing knowledge.

The daunting task for the feminist researcher is the 'how' of this deconstruction and reconstruction. If we are to use the famous feminist argument with regard to history, the fact that the women's story is left untold (say in narratives on colonialism in Africa) does not mean that half the story is left untold. Rather it means that the story has to be told anew. As Oakley puts it, this brings up the problem, 'not of gender and methodology, but of the gendering of methodology itself as a social construction' (1998:707).

Research is principally about the power to define reality and, in effect, make some claim about the world. In as far as feminist research is concerned, the very central question is from what point of view is reality being defined and what claims are made, especially with regard to women's location and gender relations in general? This goes hand in hand with the acknowledgement that each aspect of reality is gendered and ingrained within a dynamic social process of specific contexts. To address that question through the entire research process, a series of questions ought to be posed at each level. For example, what informs the choice, why are the questions identified important at all, and what are the underlying assumptions, especially about men and women?

If we think about research as a series of steps relating to assumptions and procedures, these are basically four. One is the very starting point of formulating the questions and/or the identification of the research problem; two is the setting up of tools and gathering evidence; three is the interpretation of evidence and four, the dissemination of the research outputs. And specifically, what is the location/place of 'woman' as a fundamental focus for feminism? Such questions then determine the choice of tools as well as the overall interpretive strategy.

On Gender and Epistemology

Epistemology – the theory of knowledge – is an important arena in feminist research. It primarily addresses questions of what knowledge is, how knowledge is acquired and what the means of production of that knowledge are. According to Harding, epistemology:

> answers questions about who can be a knower…what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge; …what kinds of things can be known… (1987:3).

Epistemological questions hence form part of the fundamentals of research methodology and ways of knowing. As such, the feminist challenge begins at this very point, meaning that the ordering of the knowledge production has to change to include women as well as the consideration of relations of gender as part of what needs to be known.

Feminist knowledge proceeds from the position that women have been silenced and made invisible in the knowledge enterprise. In specific relation to social research, the premise is that traditional social science ignores or marginalises women, that all the major social theories explain the world from the masculine point of view (Ahikire 1994; Imam 1997; Oakley 1998). Hence, as a starting point, feminist methodology involves 'conceptualising women as knowers' (Obbo 1997) and giving them a subject as opposed to an object status in the research process, validating the voice of the researched (Harding 1987).

Yet, voice is not an unproblematic issue. There are questions about the extent to which claims of giving voice to research subjects are real. A number of critics have posed questions about whether or not the pretext of giving voice carries with it a danger of recreating inequalities in knowledge production thereby masking a deeper form of exploitation.

The way out of this impasse is however not to abandon the whole concept of the voice of the researched. The orientation of constructing the women as knowers, and not just as a source of *raw* data, is key to feminist research. Giving, or rather allowing for, voice of the researched, especially women, is about validating their experiences and using those experiences as a basis for further theorisation. Principally, feminist research is concerned with the fact that women's voices ought to be captured and validated to inform the conceptual and interpretive strategy.

When looking at the question of who holds the power in research, another question that needs to be considered is that of standpoint. Standpoint epistemology is a theory of knowledge that attaches importance

to one's position in society. Narayan argues, for instance, that oppressed social groups have an epistemic privilege in terms of knowledge about both their own position and that of the dominant groups – what is sometimes referred to as 'double vision' (1989:265). The argument here is that the location of oppressed groups allows them knowledge of both their own contexts and those of their oppressors since they must survive in a society governed by the practices of their oppressors.

If we look at women as an oppressed social group, we can place women in different groups based on social cleavages such as class, race, ethnicity, religion and age. Standpoint epistemology regarding women in the research process would mean that women would generally have an epistemic advantage over men in terms of the understanding of gender relations. In terms of intra-gender power relations, this would also mean that women from relatively disadvantaged groups have more epistemic privilege than women from dominant groups. What then does standpoint epistemology mean for feminist research in the African context?

At the very broad level, there have been robust feminist debates around the question of race and the fact that white feminists have tended to dominate 'Third World' feminist scholarship. Amadiume (1997), Mohanty (1988), Oyewumi (2000, 2013) and many others critique the fact that Third World women have been predominantly viewed through the lens of white women thereby distorting their reality. In her 1988 article, 'Under Western Eyes', Mohanty offers a forceful critique of the assumption of women as an 'always-already' constituted group in the particular case of the 'Third World' as a manifestation of colonial discourse and Western ethnocentrism. Amadiume's 1990s thesis of 'Re-inventing Africa' basically stems from her long time battle with what she terms:

> the racist division of the world and the indifference to those being studied – in the attitude and politics of western feminists to Third World women (1987:2).

Amadiume strongly argues that the generalisation about African women is a false imposition and a key methodological problem in feminist research in Africa. Mohanty also asserts that the problem is not only in relation to Western researchers but that it also pertains to what she terms 'identical analytical principles employed by Third World scholars writing about their own cultures' (1988:62).

In effect, the imperative here is that Black/African women are in a better position to write about and analyse their contexts. This is a very significant area of the politics of knowledge especially with regard to feminist knowledge where there is already an accusation of it being an

imposition from the West. Yet this should not necessarily lead to the kind of fundamentalism expressed in the phrase 'it takes one to know one'. It only means that African women scholars or African feminist scholars generally ought to have the capacity to control the means of discourse about their experience (Narayan 1989). Controlling the means of discourse about the African experience means that African scholars in a very general sense are at the forefront of the theorisation and determination of the direction of the knowledge enterprise. In a sense, the epistemic privilege question should be posed at all levels – men versus women, Black women versus white women, middle-class versus poor women and so on.

Feminists have emphasised the fact that conducting feminist research needs to be framed in a way that allows for a transparent acknowledgment of power relations in the research process with equally transparent mechanisms to deal with those relations. The feminist researcher must constantly engage with the question of what power relations exist between the researcher and the researched. In this way feminist research is not merely an 'extraction of data' but rather a process that leaves the researched more empowered.

The issue here is that power dynamics in the research process should not be assumed to operate in a particular direction, as class and status are in fact highly complicated in contemporary contexts. It should indeed never be surprising if a woman employs the very constructions that oppress women to refer and /or relate to a fellow woman. Women's actions must be understood within their context of subordination. Women employ the ideological constructions – whether ethnic, cultural or religious – available to them as members of specific communities.

On the whole, epistemological questions are very significant for feminist research and more so in the African context. Although these arguments about 'us' and 'them' could relate generally to the entire field of social research, it is also true that through the feminist engagement, the subject woman has engendered new insights into the debate. What needs to be underlined is that epistemological issues need not be posed in a way that causes paralysis. Morsy (1998) in her exposition of studying her Egyptian homeland demonstrates the complexities of epistemic advantage and concludes that Arab women researchers no doubt have the opportunity to make important theoretical contributions towards the understanding of their society but hastens to add that:

> Our direct experience in our homeland is only an opportunity for knowing, not knowledge itself (1998:90).

Narayan similarly argues against a reification of the doctrine of 'double vision' into a metaphysics that serves as a substitute for concrete social analysis (1989:268). A critical point in the above assertions is the reminder that African feminist researchers should steer clear of the tendency to assume that mere location in the continent necessarily passes for epistemic advantage, where the African woman becomes 'data' itself. It is an opportunity for knowing that should be nurtured and contextually legitimated rather than taken for granted.

Quite honestly, a crude construction of difference, for example epistemic advantage and how it should inform the claim to knowledge, may turn out to be counterproductive. Differences of say, Black, white, middle class, peasant, grassroots can be used as dichotomies, and invoked to invalidate whatever any woman has to say. A good example is how, in the African context, women scholars are often accused of taking advantage of poor women and assuming to speak on their behalf. This calls for a good amount of reflexivity in the research. Ultimately, the feminist researcher does not have to be apologetic about 'speaking on behalf' – instead it is turned into the strength of what is written and/or advanced.

Researching Gender Relations: Representing Women

Researching gender relations involves the analysis of how gender structures relationships and how, at the same time, gender is structured through other social processes. According to Imam, research on gender could take three forms: One, it may be focused specifically on women (or men) so long as the analysis clearly recognises the gender relations which historically construct its subject. Two, it may also focus specifically on some referent of gender relations such as conjugal relations (husband/wife). And three, researching gender may also be about integrating the feminist insights into the understanding of almost any phenomenon (1997:5).

In Africa, it is observed that the broad span of feminist studies mainly falls in category one and two, while very little falls in category three. Several studies have analysed women's positions and conditions in specific political economic social and cultural settings. For example, there are studies about women's access to different spaces including education, health, employment, production inputs and public office to mention but a few. There are also studies on the status of women in different cultures as well as studies on the different roles of women ranging from social movements to household provisioning and reproduction. A few studies also take on the gendering processes at societal level, deepening the understanding of the complexity of national and international processes through a gendered analysis.

Whatever the choice of level, it is important that key questions are posed at each stage of the research with this central concern: 'how feminist'? The key questions relate to assumptions about women and men's role in society, issues of agency and particularly how women are represented, issues of agency as well as assumptions about women and men's role in society. Fundamentally, what does it mean to do African feminist research?

Representation: Hearing, Seeing Women and the Question of Agency

As noted above in the discussion on epistemology, feminist researchers in the Third World generally and in Africa in particular have challenged the paternalistic and ethnocentric generalisation of Third World women as poor and helpless – eternal victims. For example, stemming from what Lazreg (1994) calls a tendency to reduce women into one dimension of their lives such as family and housework, the discourse on Third World women has been overly totalising. Over the years there has been a strong insistence on according women a subject rather than an object status in research. Currently, there is a strong inclination towards approaches that seek to make African women visible. Indeed, as already indicated, the majority of feminist studies actually focus on women.

Yet the issue of representation is not answered by visibility alone. Attendant questions must be posed with regard to how visible, which aspects are made visible and which ones are silenced, and with what consequences, both in theoretical and practical terms. Going back to the issue of women as eternal victims, several African feminist researchers (see for example Obbo 1980; Amadiume 2000) take the orientation of looking at African women as social agents. The point here is that whereas it is an undeniable fact that women have been historically disadvantaged relative to men, looking at them as eternal victims creates a discourse of lamentation. 'Victimologies', as Harding observes, 'tend to create a false impression that women have only been victims, that they have never successfully fought back' (1987:5). Notions of vulnerability and the need to empower women then become so pervasive that they tend to displace their agency and the need to contend with the social structure.

Going beyond victimologies means that we need a different conception of power that always anticipates some space for contestation, or 'at the very least passive resistance' (Crehan 1997:231). This does not at all imply that we lose sight of power regimes (Fraser 1989). For example, systemic male privilege in public politics cannot be ignored. However, power is seen both in its coercive nature and resistance to it, such that we are able to capture processes of contestation.

While victimologies have been relatively dominant in the research with a development leaning, historiographies have been able to excavate some interesting modes of resistance. Studies on Buganda culture reveal that although installation of an heir is publicly a male affair, it is actually female folk that sit the previous day to decide on which man/brother becomes heir to their father (Sacks 1979; Musisi 1991). Historiographies like Van Allen's 1976 analysis recreate and rename the struggles of women in early twentieth century Nigeria rescuing it from the British colonialist's label of 'Aba Riots' and recognising it as the 'Women's War'. Such studies have restored history to women and in effect also restored women to history.

These studies demonstrate the fact that there is need for more and far-reaching African feminist historiography. In Uganda there is a popular local saying among the Basoga which goes like this: *omwami kyakoba nange kyenkoba*, which means 'what my husband says is what I say or follow'. This response has been encountered by researchers in this region where, after asking the man, they would then ask the woman what she had to say. The women would naturally say that all had been said, even when they had contrary views. Hence a fruit-picking researcher would quickly assume that women's powerlessness is an orthodoxy, yet the actual terrain could present heterodoxy if it were explored more thoroughly.

Furthermore, there should be caution about romanticising direct speech and 'what people said'. Feminists have particularly come under attack on the basis that recording the direct speech of the women in itself is used to prove the truthfulness of the accounts (Hardiman 1986:289). There are many factors that mediate oral evidence, including the fact that the way women talk about their lives is already embedded in the ways women think about themselves – and what they are supposed to think about. Women can even give the inquirer not only what they think they want to hear, but also deliberately and tactfully minimise their powers to conform to the dominant ideologies (Ahikire 1994). Instances of women professing oppression even in cases where they have power are common in matters to do with sexuality, family decisions and ownership of property. Conversely, men may also play powerful without showing the limitations of their masculinity in their actual lived experiences.

Do these cautions therefore mean that the researcher has to treat oral evidence (from women or men) with contempt? The answer is NO. The issue is not so much about truths as about rigorous social analysis. These dilemmas only alert the feminist researcher to the need to employ ingenuity and tools that can simultaneously capture voice as well as analyse concrete reality. In this way, instances of women deliberately downplaying their role in society are part of the material to be analysed which would further

explicate the nature and character of gender relations. This also avoids the reproduction of stereotypes about women and men where general actual social practice has long moved beyond professed normative standards.

A related aspect of women's visibility is resistance. Women's resistance to institutionalised patriarchy takes many covert and overt forms, and feminists have demonstrated the power of silence as a form of resistance. In this sense, a feminist researcher ought to have the appropriate tools to 'hear silence', so to say. The apparent invisibility of women in many accounts of African historical experiences has been attributed to the inability of many a researcher to take cognisance of women's different struggles. Referring to Algerian women, Lazreg (1994) for example argues that women's silence registered by the colonial society gave rise to stereotypical views about them, specifically arising from the lack of understanding of the dynamics of the Algerian communities. Consider, for example, this quote from a poem by Adrienne Rich:

> Silence can be a plan
> Rigorously executed
> The blueprint to a life
> It is a presence
> It has a history of form
> Do not confuse it with any kind of absence

Yet, at the level of political practice, silence maybe a controversial term, in that there is a danger of romanticising women's agency. Moreover, Edholm *et al.* flagged a warning against looking at women in isolation and making them powerful 'in their own spheres'. They argued that:

It is not necessary to look behind manifest social forms in order to see women because such a perspective reinforces the notion of separate spheres of men and women, while leaving women appear as of marginal relevance in the analysis of fundamental social structures (1978:126).

The central concern for feminism, especially in the African context, is therefore the need for a proper and concrete analysis of power regimes – beyond generalisation. In this way it is possible to recognise African women's positions and how they sometimes create spaces for themselves in systems that are evidently oppressive to them. The challenge here is to recognise power regimes without collapsing into stereotypes and generalisations.

The tendency to generalise about women and especially African women has been conflated with the problem of Western ethnocentrism but we can also argue that these may be separate concerns. Mohanty (1998) argues

that colonial discourses have been employed by Western researchers and researchers in the South alike, and this can be seen in the way African rural women are generalisable the same way in which African/Third World women were generalised in Western discourse. In effect the rural has been constructed as a repository of knowledge – the rural woman as the authentic woman (Ngaiza & Koda 1991) and 'the other'. The way we recognise the fact that Third World women are not generalisable should be the way we look at rural women. They are not homogenous, neither are they eternal victims.

The other methodological challenge is the definition of women's roles in relation to the normative male world (Arnfred 2002). One clear example is the issue of looking at women as in need of help to catch up with the masculine mode in spaces from which they have historically been excluded. This, for instance may come up in the analysis of women and public politics where the conclusion is often that one needs to train women to be effective, meaning that there has been a methodological failure to appreciate and analyse institutionalised gender power relations. This is why the emphasis should move beyond the individual and take on the gendered ways in which society is structured.

Historiography poses its own methodological challenges for feminist research. Part of the explanation for the generalisation and stereotypes about African women is the historical vacuum. The written record (archives), as many feminists have observed, is gender-blind with ingrained male bias. The strong urge to have feminist theorising grounded in the historical context is based on the fact that understanding the past also helps to explicate the present and perhaps the future. Due to the limited written record, African feminism has the duty to reconstruct history through ingenious triangulation of hearing, listening and content analysis. This has led to the emphasis on orature, oral history and biography which writers such as Mama (1996) have observed.

The Qualitative/Quantitative Debate

Quantitative research is concerned with numbers while qualitative research leans more on meanings and explanations. The qualitative versus quantitative debate may or may not be a methodological one depending on the perspective that one takes. The 1970s saw an intense debate centring on whether quantitative or qualitative research methods were more appropriate and more scientific. To a large extent feminist researchers have preferred qualitative approaches because quantification as a research tradition tends to obscure power relations and thus make women's realities of less importance. What needs to be clarified, however, is that these are not necessarily feminist methods per se, but rather methods

that feminists, especially in the African setting, have found appropriate for the 'excavation' of women's voices as well as the reordering of knowledge for gender transformation. Reinharz argues that:

> Because feminist research stems from the critical distrust of earlier non feminist research and because much of earlier work was conducted using quantitative methods, a symbiosis has occurred between feminist and qualitative…qualitative methods are thought to be the methods that protest against the status quo, just as feminism does so generally (1993:69).

Methods have a strong relationship with the type of questions asked. For example, there is a need to do more listening if one wants to capture people's/women's lived realities which have been hidden from the dominant narrative. Because quantitative methods were historically embedded within the positivist tradition, there is a tendency to equate qualitative with feminism and quantitative with non-feminist research. However, it is now clear that feminist research may employ quantitative as well as qualitative methods as long as the assumptions behind such research, as well as the interpretive frameworks, are about the central subject of feminism.

Use of quantitative data and statistical analysis may be useful in determining trends and what they mean for policy reform. Worldwide, there has been a demand for the gender category in official statistics. At the very basic level there has been a demand to include women's work in what is officially computed as work and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of economies. This demand comes from the realisation that underestimation of women's activities in different fields leads to the under-allocation of resources and opportunities to women and programmes that affect them.

In Africa in particular, the critical issue is that research and planning frameworks often operate on assumptions regarding occupational and familial roles which are culture-bound and inappropriate to the African context (Oppong 1987). For example, notions of women being 'just' housewives while men are breadwinners are imported from the Western context and imposed on the planning framework in Africa, whereas the centrality of women's labour is evident in both pre-colonial and post-colonial production systems in Africa.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Women in Development (WID) crusade brought the realisation that the invisibility of women in national statistics was partly the reason for the lack of attention to women in macro-planning exercises. African delegates in the Nairobi United Nations Conference on Women, for instance, noted the failure of planning agencies to incorporate women on an equal basis with men into macro-economic planning both as decision makers and as a focus of concern (Oppong 1987:3).

In the contemporary era this desire to invade the world of quantification grew stronger as the articulation of feminism in the development arena gained momentum, particularly in the field of gender budgeting, focused on economic governance. Research and activity around the United Nations's 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development with the imperative to track progress has renewed interest in quantification. But quantification should not just be quantification for its own sake, neither should it be the kind that objectifies people, and women in particular. Rather quantitative data should be used to enable women to make a claim on resources, both tangible and intangible. More specifically, feminist researchers with the capacity to unpack numbers need to make profound inroads to this field to operationalise gender analysis into macro-planning frameworks. In this way, feminist research will not only reveal the relative gender disparities in policy and implementation but also have the capacity to comprehensively identify critical intervention points. Similarly, once feminism makes inroads into the world of statistics, it will be able to truncate the hegemony, intellectual or otherwise, of positivist frameworks. In a way, this is one of the values of Feminist Economics, a field that still needs to be strengthened especially in the African setting.

Thinking and Practice: Gender and Participation

The feminist critique of traditional knowledge frameworks highlighted the position of the researched, especially the woman subject. The urge to make women visible and audible was all essentially about the participation of the researched. Emerging within a specifically development context, participatory approaches are about enhancing the ability of the poor to generate and control their own knowledge and to control the means of production of knowledge. The basic principle of participatory research (PR) is that research should benefit the people, be pertinent to their needs and aspirations, and ultimately lead to action.

Principles of Participatory Research

Problem-centred
Action-oriented (in principle but not always)
Researcher has a subjective commitment to the target community and to the betterment of the human condition
Collaborative research process
Respect for people's knowledge
Release of human potential

Source: Maguire 1988

Feminist scholars have been central actors in the debate and practice of participatory research because the participation prerequisite has allowed for the raising of feminist concerns broadly in the knowledge enterprise. Depending on the orientation of the research, the above aspects may be integrated into the research process in varying degrees. Feminist concerns have engendered an expansion of participation to look into all aspects of power in the research process and to underline the importance of people's positioning.

Group discussion has been one of the commonly used participatory methods in feminist research. Group discussions may be in the form of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) where 6 to 10 participants with shared interests are brought together to discuss a matter that affects them directly. These could also be general discussions with a larger number of participants. This type of broad discussion may focus on a matter that directly affects the participants, or on a general issue of social significance in their setting. For example, an issue about violence against women may be posed in general terms and not directly focused on the personal experiences of the participants. Such discussions have the value of unearthing people's perceptions, interpretations and aspirations in a much more relaxed setting than in the one-on-one interview. Such forms of groups can also be used as a vehicle for consciousness-raising.

Emphasis in current research has been placed on women-only groups. Having moved from androcentric approaches that regarded only men as 'knowers', there is now a popular assumption that one should strive to derive 'pure information from women' – that which is collected without the interruption of men. Mixed groups are only organised as control samples. Emerging evidence on the other hand seems to suggest that mixed groups of men and women, or groups containing people of mixed class and status, create real-life situations. Researchers should be able to adequately deal with the outcomes such as silences and exclusions as part of the research process. Research experience has shown that women's silence is not eternal. It largely depends on the issues at hand and the way the discussions are handled and that in some cases, mixed group discussions could have the additional value of naturally uncovering critical points of contestation in local situations. The important point is for the researcher to take cognisance of the fact that group discussions might yield superficial information in some cases, since what one says in a group may well be influenced by who is present.

Again, the caution here is that not all participation, even that of women, will qualify as feminist research, or even participatory research. There are questions about possible manipulation of participants and the kind of instrumentalism that may result from participatory research especially in development practice contexts.

By Way of Conclusion

There is a need to build resources for bottom-up agency (for women and/or men). The idea is that feminist research in Africa ought to liberate itself from developmentalism which threatens to empty it of its political imperative. Even within the extreme condition of deprivation, feminist research should not only focus on influencing top-down change in terms of policy for addressing 'women's problems'. Scholarship on gender studies will have to fundamentally shift from a particularistic approach, in many cases focused on the category 'women' in isolation, to comparative studies and continent-wide research addressing critical identified silences and focused on theory building.

Notes

1. This however does not imply homogeneity in the sense that all work in the area of women's studies would be put in this category. Rather it refers to dominant trends at the time.
2. It is important to spell out at this point that the term feminism may be a controversial one, especially in the African context. Over the years there has been a tendency to shy away from the word feminism by academics and activists alike, because it has been a historically polluted term identified with Western values and by extension, Western cultural imperialism. As a result, it may seem that we have gender research in opposition/addition to feminist research. The use of 'gender' as an alternative seems popular because the latter appears less threatening– even 'good women' can use it. We need to understand that the concept of gender was ideally supposed to operationalise feminism at the analysis level. In this sense therefore research that falls under this broad rubric will be referred to as feminist research. And when we consider politics of naming, it is through the firm naming of what feminists do that we will create a fundamental challenge to knowledge hierarchies both in the academy as well as in the social practice world.
3. The two have different imperatives. The latter is principally dismissive while the former is about according legitimacy to feminist ways of knowing as part knowledge of production
4. The debate about the power of the researcher may not necessarily assume that the researcher holds power all the time: this may not hold in some cases. Gender politics may indeed destabilise conventional power arrangements, as when visibly poor women/men may exercise enormous power on the so-called middle-class researcher.
5. Due to the reality of deprivation and economic crisis, especially in Africa, research may tend to show the problem in the empirical sense so as to have an impact on policy.

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