What Has Worked or Failed with Feminist Scholarship in Academic Spaces in Africa? The Case of the School of Women & Gender Studies, Makerere University

Jackline Kirungi*

Abstract

Gender inequality remains pervasive in Africa, despite the proliferation of scholarship on feminism on the continent. Yet over the last two decades, progressive intellectual arguments for feminism in Africa have contended that addressing patriarchal practices that underlie gender inequality was paramount to productivity and efficiency emphasised in development projects. In this light, this study explored the transformative potential of feminist scholarship at the School of Women & Gender Studies at Makerere University. It illuminates the politicisation of gender and sexual relations through thought-provoking forums and the pro-women principles contributing to aspirations of feminism scholarship in Uganda. Nonetheless, ongoing scholarship needs to ensure that feminist scholarship philosophies adjust to represent the experiences and struggles of women and their communities in Uganda. The research was qualitative in approach. It employed purposive sampling, participant observation, and consequently interpretive analysis. Data from eight key informative interviews with founders of the school, senior teaching and administrative staff, and PhD graduate students, as well as document review, informed the study.

Résumé

L'inégalité de genre reste omniprésente en Afrique, malgré la prolifération des bourses de recherche sur le féminisme sur le continent. Pourtant, au cours des deux dernières décennies, les arguments intellectuels progressistes en faveur du féminisme en Afrique ont soutenu que la lutte contre les pratiques patriarcales qui sous-tendent l'inégalité de genre était primordiale pour la

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* University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduate student in the Department of Africa and Africa in Diaspora Studies. Email: Jkirungi@uwm.edu; kjacklime@gmail.com

productivité et l'efficacité mises en avant dans les projets de développement. Dans cette optique, cet article a exploré le potentiel de transformation de la recherche féministe à la School of Women & Gender Studies de l'université de Makerere. Elle met en lumière la politisation de genre et des relations sexuelles par le biais de forums stimulant la réflexion et les principes pro-femmes qui contribuent aux aspirations de la recherche sur le féminisme en Ouganda. Néanmoins, la recherche en cours doit s'assurer que les philosophies de la recherche féministe s'adaptent pour représenter les expériences et les luttes des femmes et de leurs communautés en Ouganda. La recherche a été menée selon une approche qualitative. Elle a utilisé un échantillonnage raisonné, l'observation des participants et, par conséquent, une analyse interprétative. Les données issues de huit entretiens informatifs clés avec les fondateurs de l'école, le personnel enseignant et administratif, et les doctorants, ainsi que l'examen des documents, ont alimenté l'étude.

Introduction

Feminism remains political, and to many, it causes the imagination to reconfigure social relations. Feminism is the political and intellectual movement for women's liberation (Mama 2005). In 2017, the CODESRIA Gender Institute, one of Africa's premier research institutes, explored the theme 'Feminist Scholarship, Universities, and Social Transformation.' Following the Institute's call, I explored how feminism has evolved and been transformative at the School of Women & Gender Studies (SW&GS)–Makerere University, the most prominent women and gender study site in Africa (Mama 2004). The inclination to explore feminist scholarship's transformative capacity follows the persistent gender inequality amidst the proliferation of feminist scholarship (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). In this article, I draw insights from Pulkkinen (2016), who has conceptualised transformation in feminist scholarship. Existing scholarship suggests that feminism is sometimes denounced (Tamale 2006; Ahikire 2014a). However, feminist innovations continue to influence academic engagements and political establishments. The African Union has identified gender equality as one strategy to hasten Africa's desired change. For example, in Agenda 2063, Africa's blueprint document espouses the African Union's visions of gender equality as a strategy to achieve 'global quality life measures' (African Union Commission 2014:3). Little, however, is known about what the African Union is doing to enhance gender equality while implementing Agenda 2063 to cause the desired change (Hingston 2016). By exploring feminist scholarship and its transformative potential in the academic space in Africa, I contribute to the framing of gender in the context of Africa and envisage possibilities whereby scholarship on feminism can contribute to gender equity in the future.

Concerns of Feminist Scholarship in the Academy in Africa

The transformation of power relations remains one of the significant concerns of feminist scholarship. Feminists have committed to exploring the capacity of various activities and programmes in influencing gender relations and transforming power relations at the public and household levels in society (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Ahikire 2014a; Diaw 2007; Shackleton 2007). Gender remains a primary focus of feminism in academia and development programmes. Feminist scholars in the 1980s expressed concern about the relationship between women, gender and development. Of concern at the time was that innovations to address the emerging gaps in the evolving approaches to development from WID (Women in Development) to GAD (Gender and Development) occurred without serious efforts to reverse structural inequalities (Rathgeber 1989). Cornwall and Rivas (2015) noted that unequal gender relations were overlooked in the new framework of women's empowerment that emphasised efficiency, investment and returns, a framework preferred by corporate and development actors (*ibid.*:10). As a result, there remained tensions between development and feminism in both practice and academia. The contradictory relationship between gender and development has remained of significant concern to feminism in Africa (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Ahikire 2014a; Ossome 2015; Diaw 2007; Shackleton 2007; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2004; Mama 2004; Steady 2005).

The mushrooming academic engagements in learning institutions for instance focused on 'development' that silenced feminist concerns about sexuality, violence against women, and patriarchy (Mama 2004). Women and gender studies in Makerere university meant focusing on 'gender training as a skills-giving experience and appl[ying] gender concepts to develop interventions to improve their quality' (Kasente 1996:52). In the process, the gender studies mandate was overwhelmed by gender training for development projects while sidelining women's voices in rural Uganda (Kasente 1996). In most universities in South Africa, the gender agenda focused on diversity and emphasised sex-disaggregated data (Shackleton 2007) instead of the substantive representation of women. In Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar (UCAD), gender concentrated on increasing women's access to computers while neglecting the patriarchal structural inequalities that systematically led to women's marginalisation (Diaw 2007). Most African universities thus attempted to further development goals without addressing the marginalised status of women. Gender became a mystification 'that prevents a sharper focus on inequalities and discrimination precisely because it is too blunt and generalizing a tool

to get at some of the real issues at stake' (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). The concept of gender and its consequent programmes and projects led to a redirecting of resources that limited their ability to occasions to tackle the more pressing issues about gender relations and the gender inequality that ensued. Scholarship still showed the need to explore the potential in feminism to cause gender equality and women's emancipation.

Criteria for Transformative Feminist Scholarship in Academia

Scholarship on feminism ought to trouble, question and transform power relations if it is to be transformative (Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Pulkkinen 2016). In the process, institutions restructure social ties through the politicisation or the provocation of gender activity (Pulkkinen 2016:13). According to Pulkkinen (2016), politicisation includes raising awareness of the possibility of changing normative gender relations and provoking thought to express what is desired versus the undesired in social (gender) relations. The process also involves coining, initiating and finding words to describe the undesired, suppressed and nameless habits. Cornwall and Rivas (2015) and Pulkkinen (2016) complement each other in their conceptualisation of the transformative aspects of feminism scholarship. The former emphasise the transformation process, and the latter dwells more on the transformative indicators of feminist scholarship. For instance, Cornwall and Rivas (2015) note that all that is transformative in feminist scholarship must lobby for change in its temporality given the continuous flux of gender relations. However, Pulkkinen (2016) emphasises indicators of transformation resulting from scholarship on feminism. These include finding words to express wrongs and relatedly enhancing the survival of gender and feminist academic activity, space and forums that provoke thought. Words and language developed in the educational space later become tools for campaign and advocacy in the women's movement. In so doing, feminist scholarship enhances transformation. Cornwall and Rivas (2015) and Pulkkinen (2016) provide us with processes and signs to measure the change caused by feminist intellectual engagements. The study therefore explored forums, the lobby processes, and debates initiated by the school.

Feminist Methodology

Intuitions from feminist methodology guided the study. Scholarly investigation in feminism denounces the idea of a standard feminist methodology. Hence feminist researchers' practice of explaining their

research process : method for a given research question, purpose, and the competence of execution of the research methods used (Jayratne & Stewart 1991). I employed a qualitative research approach to explore the transformative possibilities of feminism, the foundation of women and gender studies. Individual experiences were instrumental in 'interpret[ing] and analyz[ing] observations' (Hordge-Freeman 2018:2) in the academic space. As a graduate student, I participated in several activities in SW&GS. My 'lived experiences' at the school were 'a criterion of meaning' and therefore 'a way to make knowledge claims' (Collins 2000:255).

Furthermore, my identity as a female and student of gender and feminism influenced my observations and analyses (see also Hordge-Freeman (2018:3) quoted from Charmaz 2017b). In so doing, I echo Carr and Thesee's (2012) call for critical pedagogy. Students' capacity to influence change towards the desired goal is possible when they independently make value judgments and enhance 'consciousness and critical intervention in reality' (rephrasing Freire 2005:81 as quoted in Carr and Thesee 2012:26). The university is a critical space for enhancing this environment, and given the persistent and unrestricted explorative environment inherent in the institutions' activities and programmes. Thus, the concern to speak to feminist scholarship and its transformative potential as a student.

Methods

I used open-ended key-informant interviews to allow extended conversations about the topics of interest related to the study's purpose. The study followed the CODESRIA's call to explore 'Feminist Scholarship, Universities, and Social Transformation' in 2017. The study focused on women and gender studies at Uganda's most comprehensive and oldest public university – Makerere University. Data was collected using eight key informant interviews, participant observations, primary document reviews (reports), and publications. I used snowball sampling to identify respondents for the study. The school's staff was small, yet it did excellent instruction, gender awareness-raising, and gender mainstreaming in academic spaces, national programmes, and non-governmental organisations. Thus, convenience sampling was the best way to access the dispersed staff. With the recommendations from the dean of SW&GS and the deputy academic registrar of the college of social sciences, I conducted the research. I obtained participants' verbal consent through phone calls and face-to-face interaction with them.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a thematic analysis to organise, identify emerging themes, and synthesise the data collected. The research explored the following questions: why was the school founded, and what was its role in improving women's status and reconfiguring power relations?

Limitations of the Study

The study focused on the activities at the School of Women and Gender studies at Makerere University. Therefore, it does not give insight into the school's relationship with the rural communities. Future studies will need to explore the school's relationship with rural populations as feminism has been associated with elite women and not rural women. The study findings are also not generalisable. The results and conclusions of the study are exploratory and thus open for testing. The study focused on PhD students, senior lecturer(s)/administrative staff, and founder members. There will be a need to explore the perspectives of master's graduate students on the feminist transformative potential of the school. They made up the school's highest number of graduate-level students.

SW&GS–Makerere University as an Academic Space

SW&GS–Makerere University was the site for the study. In 1990, the school began as a women's studies department (Ankrah 2018). The department evolved into the SW&GS–Makerere University. It is the most prominent women and gender study site in Africa (Mama 2004). The school operated under the College of Humanities and Social Sciences–Makerere University and has been in existence for over three decades. It envisages being a 'center for academic excellence in women & gender studies at the local, national, and international levels.'

The school has a prominent national and regional influence. It evolved with the women's movement that flourished with the coming to power of the National Resistance Movement. Historically, females have been central in the formation, leadership and organisation, and anti-establishment, in pre-colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial Uganda (Mulindwa 2011). Following the ceasefire after the five-year guerilla war (1981–86), women joined in service in the new avenues enabled by democratic governance implemented in the 1990s. The Local Government Act of 1997, the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, the Uganda Land Act 1998, the Uganda National Gender Policy, and affirmative action of 1.5 points to women joining public universities, among other developments, facilitated the school's coming into

existence. Through affirmative action, policies institutionalised women's participation in Uganda's political, social and economic processes. The school also benefited from the UN's support for women's involvement in development throughout Africa (Munah 2007; Ahikire 2007).

The women and gender studies centre worked with national, regional and international bodies. At the continental level, the school fostered senior staff skills and knowledge in other regions of Africa including at Great Zimbabwe University. It has also been pivotal in the operations of the gender mainstreaming department of Makerere University. In addition, the school provided employment, resources and academic and professional growth. As a body of knowledge, it helped scholars attain qualifications – PhDs, master's, bachelors and certificates. It also served as a service discipline to other departments through offering teaching and learning sessions on gender, feminism and women. The school's academic staff was involved in several research networks across the globe: Ethiopia, Nepal, Sweden, Norway, Vietnam, to mention but a few.

The school focused on sensitising the various constituencies interacted with (students, government and non-government organisations) on the conceptualisation of gender and feminism. Scholars were also involved in analysing gender equality and gender equity across the different programmes in Uganda (GLED Task Force, SW&GS 2016). In so doing, academic engagements involved examining challenges experienced by women and men in attempting to benefit from development opportunities in the country. In 2016, the school assessed the Gender and Local Economic Development (GLED) course, a one-year postgraduate diploma in women and gender studies (GLED Task Force, SW&GS 2016). The course was offered to local government officers to foster their skills to integrate gender in the different government programmes they oversee (*ibid.*). The school had examined 'the long-term impact of the course and its relevance. Findings revealed that students had recognized the importance of involving women and men in district development programs pioneered by Uganda's government. In this regard, one of the officers had begun linking women to Savings and Credit Cooperatives Societies (SACCOs). As a result, they got a loan to start micro-enterprises' (quoted from GLED Task Force, SW&GS 2016: 19). The training involved women and men in programme activities to increase productivity through 'promoting efficiency and effectiveness in social service delivery. It also aimed to enhance employment creation, increase agricultural production and productivity, improve competencies and value addition, and increase the quality of existing public infrastructure' (GLED Task Force, SW&GS 2016:12).

The school also ran a Master of Arts in gender studies programme with courses such as (1) gender and economic development, (2) gender, state, and public policy, (3) gender and development management, (4) gender, institutions and social transformation, (5) gender and economics in developing countries, (6) gender, conflict and displacement, and (7) theoretical perspectives in gender and development. Also, the school registered PhD students directly under it. These efforts culminated in an edited book volume by academic staff and students pursuing their doctorate degrees (Muhanguzi, Ahikire, Gerrard *et al.* 2014). With support from SIDA and Makerere Institutional Development Programme, the school also implemented a programme on Capacity Building of Women in Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Higher Education in Uganda 2015–2020 within public universities: Kyambogo University, Busitema University, Gulu University and Mbarara University. In addition, the school was piloting a PhD in gender studies involving other public universities. The school supported the development of other academic units, including the Network of Ugandan Researchers and Research Users.

The school progressed with female leadership and administration. Beginning as a department, Professor Victoria Mwaka was its first head. She later joined parliament as a Member of Parliament. Professor Joy Kwesiga succeeded her, who was succeeded by Professor Grace Kyomuhendo Bantebya. As a school, Associate Professor Consolata Kabonesa was its first dean, followed by Associate Professor Josephine Ahikire and Associate Professor Sarah Ssali, its current dean. The institution's women leaders were assigned higher posts at different universities following their SW&GS services. For example, Professor Joy Kwesiga later became dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and a member of the University Council. She also headed the Makerere Gender Mainstreaming Division before becoming Vice-Chancellor for Kabale University. Professor Maria Musoke, a founder member of the school and first documentalist of the women and gender studies centre, was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, academic affairs, at Kyambogo University. Professor Josephine Ahikire, a former dean of the school, was the Deputy Principal Academic Affairs–College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University. The school has played a pivotal role in providing women with opportunities to take up higher positions at the university. The SW&GS as an academic space offers hands-on experience to women and therefore empowers and prepares them for higher leadership positions.

Consequently, it can be argued, the school has grow administrative skills among women academics who have ended in administrative positions at the university. For example, as deans or heads of the department, women are

engaged in designing university policies. In addition, female professors provide mentorship to students seeking to obtain higher degrees. In so doing, women serve as role models. They also support students find scholarships besides intellectual and emotional support.

Findings of the Study

Women, Development and Feminism in the School's Initial Stage

The study examined the motives behind the foundation of SW&GS. The overall objective was to understand the school's contribution to feminist scholarship at Makerere University. The desire to improve women's status at the university caused women to establish the school. They aimed to heighten their recognition within the university. With the establishment of the school, women would acquire positions as administrators and academics within the university. 'The women in the university, though qualified to be university employees, hardly gained leadership roles. The few women in leadership at the time were also demoralised' (Interview III, July 2018). Therefore, the school provided an autonomous space for women.

The school's establishment was also supported by previous actions of solidarity by women in Uganda to mobilise in pursuance of their welfare (Mulindwa 2011). Women's organisations like Action for Development (ACFODE), the National Council of Women, and the Association of University Women, for example, played a pivotal role in forming the school. Women's efforts were also supported by the UN's programming with developing countries that expanded in the 1980s (founder member, 1 July 2018). Through the UN Decade for Women campaign (1975–85) the UN intervened to reduce poverty due to the economic challenges that resulted from Structural Adjustment programmes administered in independent African countries. These efforts influenced several pro-women structures across Africa (Munah 2007; Abdullah 2007). In Uganda, the efforts were more evident in the increased participation of women in politics. The school created a space for women to participate in public affairs.

Women also preferred the idea of development in the early stages of forming the women and gender study centre to feminism:

> We focused on women, equality, development, and peace. How women can be equal to men was one of our concerns. How can women get educated? Women extremists introduced feminism to cope. Even the word feminism was not in the first letters we drafted. But, of course, the countries are low developed countries – before women develop, how can one talk about sexuality?' (Interview, 1 July 2018).

The ideas that informed the women and gender studies centre also highlighted concerns of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing convened by the UN. They included equality, development and peace.

Women more quickly related to equality, development and peace than with feminism. Discussions of sacred topics like sexuality pushed founders of the school away from feminism (Interview I, July 2018). The uproar that followed the support of homosexuals by a Makerere University don in 2003 showed the difficulty of dealing with sexuality questions that underlie feminism (Tamale 2007). In worst-case scenarios, resistance to open discussions on homosexuality led to the death of homosexual activists (*ibid.*). However, the school progressively facilitated public dialogues on heterosexual relations such as sexual harassment among students and staff of the opposite sex within the university. Furthermore, the embedment of feminism in Western discourse such as 'behavioural psychology and anthropology' (Interview III, July 2018) also caused women to detach from it. Women desired to advance agendas that were imbued in the struggles and beliefs of their people. Nonetheless, feminism was deemed necessary in the school's instructions and activism actions though women preferred a 'small link – feminism, social theory and social reform' with it (Interview I, June 2018).

Three decades since its existence, the school has remained relevant to supporting women in leadership positions challenge male hegemony. Women made progress in administration but were struggling to ensure representation of women's interests in different spaces and forums such as in parliament (Kawamara-Mishambi and Ovonji-Odida 2003). One of the founders of the school was concerned that most educated women occupied 'functional tasks along gender lines' as gender flourished more at men's service than women's. While women divorced, 'men [easily] took on two or three women and made it difficult to divorce' (Interview III, July 2018). In so doing, gender became an 'organizing principle in accumulation and operation of colonial and transnational capital and the allocation of resources and privilege' in Africa (Steady 2005:314). Gender and development operations were supported and funded as they reproduced gender inequalities.

Feminist Forums and Engagements in the School

The school created and maintained great feminist forums and debates. The forums were short-term and long-term. The forums examined in the study were the intensive course that lasted ten days and the Gender Identity Week run once a year. The research did not include long-term forums like the MA programme and undergraduate-level class sessions. They required historical and pedagogical lenses and resources to explore, whose mobilisation

was not within the means of the study. Besides, Bozalek and Zemblylas (2017) have shown that many negotiations and adjustments occurred in classroom settings at the interpersonal level whenever instructors conveyed feminist knowledge. The transformation potential of a classroom setting in scholarship on feminism in the Ugandan case will need attention.

The short-term forums held by the school were very productive. They enhanced courageous discussions on intimate relations among students and staff. This was true of the North-South Intensive Course and the Gender and Identity Week Campaign Forum. While one lasted ten days, the school ran the other once a year, beginning in 2017 and lasting a week.

The North-South Intensive Course focused on the individual students questioning and voicing taken-for-granted experiences with the body. Administered for ten days (16–23 August 2010), the course targeted MA and PhD students at SW&GS–Makerere University. It was entitled: 'Gender, Nationalism & the Body: Post-colonial and Intersectional Perspectives on Situated Knowledge.' The course illuminated interdisciplinary questions regarding gender and sexuality, embodiment, nationalism, policymaking, agency and resistance. The meetings enhanced personal stories and evoked memories concerning the body, sexuality, agency and resistance.

The course was divided into three clusters. In Cluster 1: constructions of gender and sexuality, students were subjects and objects in research. Based on their own experiences and memories, they constituted material for analysis. Students were required to write about memories of their bodies in the third performance narrative. Cluster 2 focused on nationalism, gender and embodiment. It was on embodied subjectivities. Students and facilitators explored how bodies are policed and regulated by institutions, practices and discourses. Deliberations in Cluster 2 also involved analysing representations of bodies concerning resistance, agency and subversion. Hence discussions on policing/regulating bodies, presentations of diseased, disabled and un/altered bodies, beauty, pornography and eroticism. Cluster 3 focused on policy, agency and resistance. In so doing, students focused on policy analysis, different perspectives on the politics of knowledge production, deconstructive approaches to policies and critiques and counter-critiques of Northern construction theories of the body and sexuality.

The North-South Intensive Course was different from the traditional curriculum for the MA programme in women and gender studies. The MA curriculum was composed of courses such as (1) gender, state and public; (2) gender and economic development; (3) gender and development management; (4) gender, institutions and social transformation; (5) gender, conflict and displacement; and (6) theoretical perspectives in gender and development. The

courses focused on development, a situation attributed to marketisation, that took over feminism empowerment agendas (Mama 2004:122). SW&GS had been in this dilemma since the 1990s (Kasente 1996).

I also examined the Gender Identity Week Campaign of 2018 through participant observation. The event lasted a week. It kicked off with a walk through the university. It aimed at raising awareness of the gender platform in the university. Participants were involved in presentations and panel discussions throughout the week. They were reflexive of the campaign's theme: 'Transformations for Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: Opportunities and Challenges.' The theme ensued from the National Women's Day celebrations in the same year. The student body and staff from the school and other schools in the university participated in the activity. The activity involved officials from gender and social justice-related non-governmental organisations. The theme attracted discussions on positive masculinities, social-economic transformation, sexual harassment policing, women's rights to productive resources, and women and political participation.

Of interest were the deliberations on sexual harassment policy issues. The session was the most informative compared to the other sessions I attended. Students revealed what happened to girls who testified they were experiencing sexual harassment during the discussions. They observed that current avenues for registering sexual harassment seemed to expose girls to other forms of vulnerability, such as dismissal from school and humiliation. Girls explicitly and implicitly called their perpetrators to order and staged open resistance to organisations and beliefs that informed girls' sexual exploitation. Girls normalised the accountability process among their contemporaries and the university at large.

It is important to note that Makerere University amended its sexual harassment policy in 2018, the same year in which the dialogue on sexual harassment policing took place. However, it was difficult to conclude the extent to which the conversation influenced the amendment of the university's sexual harassment policy. The policy hardly indicated how students were involved in the deliberations that led to its revision. Following events on the sexual harassment policy in Makerere University, students, through the female guild president, still demanded a 'say on sexual harassment policing' (URN 2020 ; URN 2021). But the amended University Policy and Regulations Against Sexual Harassment (UPRSH) pronounced: 'zero tolerance' for sexual harassment within the university community. Furthermore, it empowered victims to seek redress when harassed and 'impose[d] such sanctions and corrective action regarding acts of sexual harassment' (UPRSH 2018:4). The policy objectives, therefore, directly contested sexual harassment.

Considering the North-South Intensive Course and the Gender and Identity Week Campaign, it would be argued that the school was instrumental in sustaining dialogue between men and women on delicate topics. The discussion enabled voicing the complex relations and experiences in and outside the university. The meetings also revolved around women's and girls' experiences helping voice women's concerns. Unfortunately, women's voices have been silenced in most cases simply because women's experiences have highlighted the downsides of men's power in most patriarchal societies like Uganda.

The forums were however short-term compared to the MA programme in women and gender studies and the GLED course that focused on development. The forums that focused on feminism's topical questions like sexuality and the body lasted the longest, ten days in a year. But academic, administrative and support staff coordinated the activities in collaboration with their patrons. The school staff was employed and renumerated by the government of Uganda in partnership with its donor community since Makerere University remained a public university. The state, therefore, played a significant role in maintaining the staff in SW&GS. However, findings showed that staff spent less time on activities and debates that enhanced accountability on sensitive gender relations – sexual relations.

Publications

Publications by SW&GS remained a central instrument to sustaining feminist engagements within national and international academic spaces. Collaborating with the University of Tromso–Norway, the school co-edited and published a book: *Gender, Poverty and Social Transformation: Reflections on Fractures and Continuities in Contemporary Uganda* Kyomuhendo, Gerrand, Ahikire, *et al.* 2014). The book is a collection of works from the staff's research areas of expertise. Doctoral students also contributed to the reader. The school launched the book in two forums: 1) the Women's World Congress in India, organised by the Israel Association for Feminist and Gender Studies President in 2014; and 2) the Makerere University-Main Campus forum organised by the staff of SW&GS in partnership with the University of Tromso–Norway, in 2017. The book has raised awareness about the school's academic space at global and national levels, sustaining gender and feminist forums.

The authors illuminate realities about gender relations in Uganda in the book. However, they note that their research did not reflect the rate at which changes were taking place in gender relations: whereas gender relations are in a continuous flux, scholarship in the field had not kept the pace (Muhanguzi, Ahikire, Gerrard *et al.* 2014). The research mainly focused on women's plight

rather than on men in Uganda's use, access and negotiation of critical resources. Structures like decentralised land governance, microfinance, and information communication technologies (ICT) to extend services to local communities risked increasing male hegemony in sophisticated ways (Madanda 2014; Nsibirano and Kabonesa 2014). For example, women negotiating land rights through local government structures risked mistreatment and rejection in society. Society still considered the land a male rather than a female resource (Ahikire 2014b). With the mushrooming of microfinance institutions in Uganda, businesswomen continued to operate with insignificant returns (Ninsiima 2014). Thus, women pressed on to survive amidst a community still aggressive to them (Musiimenta 2014; Muhanguzi, Ahikire, Gerrard et al. 2014). More than the tales on women, the book supported feminist academic engagements in and beyond Makerere University.

Feminist Theories to Embody Local Ugandan Experiences
Use, Adoption, Adaptation and Relationship with Feminism

The study revealed that few disciplines evolved with feminist theories in their work. Scholarship on feminism was thus hardly incorporated in other disciplines: 'feminism theories are used but accidentally. They are used as an add-on, as most academics remain immersed in theories of traditional disciplines they learned before feminist theories' (male respondent I, June 2018). Yet, like people elsewhere, Africans live diverse and complex lives whose nuances disciplinary-based academic paradigms cannot capture. Plus, disciplinary-based paradigms, if anything, fragment and reduce the many truths out there rather than representing the multicultural competency needed in a new era (Mama 2005:113). Embracing feminism in disciplinary-based paradigms would enhance multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production.

The study also established that the development practitioners were not curious about feminist theories as they were interested 'in anything feminist.' The school offers expert services to development practitioners, different from the teaching and learning services provided to local government officers undertaking the GLED diploma course. But discussions revealed that:

> The few agencies that hire gender experts from the university are interested in anything feminist ... the community workers hire out gender experts to help them resolve community concerns in general. Practitioners (development organisations or social workers) do not want to know which theory you are drawing from to come up with particular ways to handle a particular challenge in the community; they just want a set of solutions from the gender expert which they are to draw on to solve an issue in the community' (female respondent, June 2018).

Academics were concerned that development practitioners applied feminism to implement community projects in reckless ways as they were not committed to any strand of feminism in their development work. Each school of thought in feminism was by a different knowledge strand: liberal, radical, African, and Black feminism perspectives. Interest in 'anything feminist' by development agents, as noted above, supposes that the different schools of thought in feminism did not matter. Yet the reasoning that led to African or Black feminism's advancement was different from the reasonings that advanced radical and liberal feminism. Thus, the lack of a preferred school of thought in feminism when implementing development programmes was another way not to commit to feminism in general. Since different feminisms speak to a different audience and emphasise different values, deciding on a particular strand of feminism would improve accountability and adaptability to feminism in development. It would be necessary for development agents to know which school of thought in feminism they are applying and are accountable to in their development plans.

Some members of the intellectual community doubted the relevance of scholarship on feminism because of the limited knowledge production regarding institutions foundational to Ugandan society, like the family (male respondent II, June 2018). One graduate, for instance, observed that scholarship on feminism needed to advance schools of thought that exemplified Uganda's support systems like the family. The family was and remained an emotional and economic safety net for most people in Uganda, especially the vulnerable people, following the poor service industry in the country. Family catered to the needs of groups of people at the margins like teenagers/youths, young, aged, pre- and post-natal mothers, and the mental and physically challenged. A significant population in Uganda was also hardly able to secure health insurance amidst privatised and inaccessible selective primary care services in Uganda (Hawkins, Ronald, Lance et al. 2021). Family contained challenges of the populations at the margins and thus the significance of evaluating its operations in educational institutions. Mama (2005) has also noted the need to pursue and develop feminist intellectual capacities grounded in contemporary African social and political realities as a means of attaining new levels of activism demanded by the complexities of the times (Mama 2005). Therefore, the school needed to invest in research and publication on family life as a significant structure in Uganda.

Research findings also revealed that Ugandans had connected with different strands of feminism in ways that needed investigation. Radical feminism, for instance, stirred a significant debate among Ugandans. These

developments need to be explored by the school as the leading educational institution on feminism scholarship in Uganda and Africa at large.

> Radical feminism has attracted many conversations in and outside the university. [But] it is associated with specific individuals in the university who have not formally contributed to radical feminism. Such individuals are associated with radical feminism because of how they approach particular issues in society' (male graduate student, 2 June 2018).

There was the need to explore debates around radical feminism and the different ways society in Uganda connected to it. The school needed more academic engagements to advance feminism frameworks considering Ugandans experiences with feminism.

Discussions also revealed that students had remained incurious about feminist theorising and conceptualisation despite their relevance in teaching and learning. 'Students do not engage theories; they do not critique and therefore do not learn. They do not engage any concepts' (female respondent 5, June 2018). The school offered a course on theories titled 'theoretical perspectives in gender and development' in its MA programme. In this course, students studied different kinds of feminisms. As an alumnus of the school, theories taught included radical, liberal and socialist feminist theory. Less was noticeable regarding African feminism, Black feminism, and African-womanism. It would be essential to explore how the school has been receptive to other theories. Drawing on my experience as a graduate student of the school (2007–10), having a critical understanding of a theory that interested you (the student) was important to writing a dissertation thesis. It was unimaginable to complete a dissertation thesis without a thorough understanding of the feminist theoretical framework and concepts guiding your project. It would be essential to know how students succeed in women and gender studies when they have not seriously engaged with its theoretical foundations.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the transformations that SW&GS achieved for scholarship in feminism. Important was the level at which the school's activities and contribution disrupted gender relations to enhance equitable distribution of power. Through its academic and administrative staff, the school had been influential in initiatives to voice experiences of women, girls and their male contemporaries in the university, at national, regional and international levels. In addition, the school facilitated discussions on sensitive questions like sexuality at the university. The successive deans of the school were experts in feminism, women and gender studies and proceeded as leaders in higher academic and political positions outside the school.

In addition, the women and development agenda, embraced more at the beginning of women and gender studies than feminism, endured predominantly in the school's services and academic programmes. Thus, the school offered essential skills for implementing development projects at national, regional and international levels. Development and gender were tangled together in the school curriculum. Less was discernible on how development and gender contributed to the school's vision of being a centre for academic excellence in women and gender studies at local, national and international levels. Besides this there was the limited influence feminism had on other disciplines. Yet feminism continued to be taught.

But the scholars in the school contended that feminism needed to be engaged to its core. Thus, concerns about practitioners wanting anything feminist to implement their projects. In addition, concerns were raised by those interviewed about the incuriosity with which students engaged with feminism and the limited ways in which feminism influenced other disciplines. Scholars noted the need to engage feminism exploring its concepts and theories, which were the foundation of creating a new agenda. Feminism, moreover, was associated with the potential to guide studies on institutions that underlie Ugandan's existence, like the family. Academics in feminism, gender and women's studies infiltrated departments, community development projects, and research. The scholarly community can no longer take feminism lightly in the university. It needs to be engaged with to understand its limits and possibilities in the existence of Ugandan society.

Conclusion

The study results extend current knowledge on the relationship between development, gender and feminism. They demonstrate that women and gender studies' connection with feminism can facilitate gender equality and stimulate intellectual ambitions to make feminism work for Ugandans. But it requires productive engagement with feminism to grapple with concerns about the limited inquisitive investment in philosophies that inform feminist practices.

In addition, the women and gender studies centre demonstrated the potential to coordinate several academic and development projects and policies at national, regional and international levels. As a result, it was noted as being highly influential. But unfortunately, its blind spots, like its contributions, can be far-reaching for communities in Africa and beyond. Hence the relevance of voices calling for a productive engagement with women, feminism, and gender studies to use it to serve well the interests of their people.

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