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## Locating Gender and Women's Studies in Nigeria: What Trajectories for the Future?\*

Charmaine Pereira

### **Women's and gender studies**

From a time when it was considered 'normal' that intellectual discourse in Nigeria should remain silent on the experiences, concerns and activities of women, or else only address women in stereotypical and restricted ways, such discourse is more likely to be challenged today. New intellectual arenas have opened up that are more critical in their aims. Women's studies is a key example of such an arena, having emerged as a field of teaching, research and scholarship in Nigerian universities since the 1980s. Orthodox ways of producing knowledge have left out not only women but also most groups of men, those who are not white, who do not belong to the dominant class, ethnic, religious groups and so on. Whilst recognising this, women's studies focuses on ensuring that women's lives, realities and concerns are central to the content of knowledge production.

Overlapping the field of women's studies is that of gender studies. Both fields originate in a common concern with the status and conditions of women. However, gender studies focuses on the socially constructed ways in which women, as well as men, are located and differentiated in a given context. Gender studies spans a wide spectrum of work. At one end are those studies that appear to be primarily motivated by a desire to appear neutral and inclusive—analyses of men's relations with women, for example, may not even acknowledge the possibility of men's domination or even abuse of women. At the other end of the spectrum are analyses that recognise inequalities and the operations of power in the social relations of gender. Scholarship within women's studies and gender studies is also differentiated by the extent to which research is aimed primarily at

*describing* the relevant phenomena concerning women and/or gender relations, as opposed to *subverting* oppressive gender hierarchies. The latter is more likely to address issues of change and transformation, and in the process, to challenge the conceptual framework for organising what traditionally counts as knowledge.

The feminist agenda in gender and women's studies entails the production of knowledge that would empower women in the struggle for liberation in the context of social transformation. Within feminism, a wide variety of schools of thought exist (see e.g. Roberts 1983; Stamp 1989; Mbilinyi 1992; Kemp et al. 1995). A range of concepts and methodologies are used that directly engage the overall project of understanding social realities in order to change them in the direction of gender justice. Recognising the agency of women as well as men, and the existence of structures and processes that are gendered, feminist scholarship asks different questions from those conventionally asked. As such, it has the potential to radically transform social knowledge, including knowledge that is otherwise viewed as progressive (see e.g. Pereira 2002a).

In this paper, I have chosen to refer to gender and women's studies in the aggregate, partly because differentiating one from the other is not always a straightforward matter and partly because scholars more often refer to their work as falling into one of either of these arenas, as opposed to feminist studies (even when their work is explicitly feminist). In Nigeria, the formation of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN) in 1996 underscored the wishes of participants to introduce concerns about women as well as gender in their teaching and research. The formation of the Network also contained within it the desire to transcend traditional paradigms, many of which were inappropriate in the Nigerian context (Mama 1996a).

The first comprehensive review of African scholarship in gender and women's studies was carried out by Mama in 1996 (Mama 1996b). Her review captures a number of detailed developments across disciplines and a range of themes under the broad umbrellas of women, politics and the state; cultural studies; work and the economy. Since then, the richness and sheer volume of scholarship has increased dramatically. Lewis's (2002) sequel to Mama's review follows themes and debates in the literature, highlighting diverse theoretical models and methodological approaches in addition to regional and conceptual dialogues and comparisons. The significance of such a review is pointed to below:

My reading has alerted me to fascinating interventions and exchanges, and especially to the significance of connections between disciplines and the reciprocal and energizing linkages between activism and research ... My impression is of a field that is dynamic, receptive to new directions and findings, and vitally attuned to priorities for transformation and justice in Africa (Lewis 2002: 3).

In view of the above, one may well ask what the status of gender and women's studies in Nigeria is today. The current scenario is one marked by the continuing dominance of First Ladyism in Nigeria, from military to civilian rule. Many among the general public find it difficult to distinguish First Ladies' pronouncements on women from women's studies. A similar scenario obtains when it comes to the public distinguishing national machineries for women from women's autonomous organisations. Moreover, religious, ethnic and 'traditional' chauvinisms of diverse kinds have been fueled by increasing poverty, corruption and mismanagement and by the failure of the state to address longstanding inequities and injustices. What is particularly disturbing here is the apparent inability of gender and women's studies, so far, to further the strategic interests of women, for gender justice. Whilst much work within gender and women's studies has this potential, it has so far not been harnessed effectively. In the context of rapid social change and global restructuring, the consolidation of conservative, anti-feminist gender politics makes it an imperative for scholars to be more critical and more reflexive about the substance of knowledge production and the interests being served by such work. This essay is part of a larger project addressing this central aim. Given the lack of attention paid to the development of women's studies in Africa and the prospects for its future growth (Lewis 2002), such a project is indeed timely.

I begin by locating gender and women's studies in the context of international, regional and national feminisms, as well as the influences of the development industry, the political and economic conditions induced by neo-liberal policies and state structures for women (see Mama 1996a). Since universities are currently a principal site of the production of gender and women's studies in the country, it is also necessary to locate these fields in the changing institutional landscape of higher education.

The aim of this essay is not so much to focus on trends in the literature, theoretical orientations or methodological considerations, important as these are. Rather, my aim is to do something that is less often done, which is to begin a process of relating intellectual content in gender and women's studies to its political agenda, with a view to outlining potential trajectories for the future. The paths of these trajectories will trace the extent to which the knowledge produced enhances or restricts the possibilities of a project of social transformation and gender justice. Theoretical orientations and methodological considerations are addressed to the extent that they impinge on this process of making explicit the links between the content of scholarship and its agenda. In my discussion, I draw considerably on my experience in the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN), as one of the 36 founding members who gave it life in January 1996, and currently as the National Co-ordinator.

The paper is presented in three parts. The first examines the context of gender and women's studies in Nigeria. The second part explores the relations between intellectual content and political agenda. Here, I address conceptualisations

of women and gender as well as the content of one of the most developed fields in women's studies in Nigeria – women's history, biography and autobiography. The last part of the paper outlines potential trajectories for the future.

### **The context of gender and women's studies in Nigeria**

#### ***International, regional and national feminisms***

By the 1970s, an upsurge in feminist organising across the world was becoming increasingly evident (see e.g. Mohanty et al. 1991; Basu 1995). For African women organising against the failure of 'development' strategies, the broader international women's movement offered a forum for articulating their perspectives. Intervening in international fora from the early 1980s onwards, leading African feminists became increasingly aware of the need to voice their distinct concerns and interests within the international women's movement. Tensions in the latter were manifested around the misrepresentations of Africa and African women's lives and realities that prevailed in the Western media and amongst Western feminists alike (see e.g. Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; AAWORD 1985).

The first regional institution set up by African women on the continent to facilitate African women researchers working on questions of gender and development was the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD). Formed in 1977, one of AAWORD's central aims was to set the agenda for feminism in Africa by facilitating research and activism by African women scholars. Some of the workshops held by AAWORD were on themes such as methodology (1983), the crisis in Africa (1985), development assistance (1989), reproduction (1992), and gender theories and social development (2001). AAWORD remains an important institutional site even though its influence and reach has declined over the years. This, in itself, is an indication of the fraught economic and political conditions under which women's organizations on the continent struggle to sustain themselves, particularly if their scope is intended to be Africa-wide. Nationally-based initiatives and centers are playing increasingly significant roles in the wake of difficulties in sustaining regionally-based sites for gender and women's studies. At the same time, understandings of place and site must necessarily be complicated by the interplay of international conferences, the movement of scholars across national and continental boundaries, and an increasing use of electronic technology (Lewis 2002).

Within the country, the organisation Women in Nigeria (WIN) was founded in 1982 at a conference held at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. WIN emerged during the 1980s as a significant force in challenging the subordination of women on the basis of class and gender. WIN's basic philosophy was that women should organise to struggle for their rights but in order to do this, it was necessary to work from a knowledge base that would provide an understanding of how women's and men's lives were structured by the socio-economic and political condi-

tions under which they lived. WIN's objectives included research, advocacy, policy-making and the dissemination of information, viewed as an integrated complex of activities. The proceedings of WIN's annual conferences from 1982 to 1987 are notable contributions to the field (Awe 1996). WIN did not describe itself as feminist, and many of the members may not have identified themselves in that way. However, key figures in its leadership were feminist and WIN's organisational focus and practice, at least in the early days, were recognised as such.

By 1990, resistance to a feminist agenda within WIN became increasingly evident. Gender conflict in WIN was never resolved but was played out in the form of internal power struggles. This took the form of leadership battles, mistrust over funds raised for projects, and allegations of corruption against opposing factions (see Salihu 1999). Not surprisingly, WIN's stature and effectiveness deteriorated during the 1990s. Many of those formerly in the leadership of WIN in its early days, left to form their own, smaller organisations. By the mid-1990s, what used to be an organised, national forum for challenging women's subordination had had its strength diffused.

A number of the newer networks and organisations combine research and activism in their pursuit of gender equity. They include, for example, the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (Osakue et al., 1995), and Girl Power Initiative, working on sexuality and reproductive health and rights; the Women and Laws project on Muslim laws (Pereira 1997a), which formed the basis for Baobab for Women's Human Rights. More recent formations that are not primarily the result of a fallout from WIN, include Gender and Development Action (GADA) and Agenda 2003, both working on increasing women's political participation; the National Coalition on Violence Against Women and the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW Interim Working Group 2001).

I return to the international level, this time to the United Nations. The declaration of the UN Decades for Women (1975–1984, 1985–1994) reflected the UN's response to the pressure exerted upon it by women's groups around the world. Once created, the UN platforms were enthusiastically pursued by women's organisations in Nigeria, largely because the political space available for addressing violations against women at the national level was so restricted. This was the consequence of prolonged military rule and women's serious marginalisation from public life and politics under authoritarian rule, whether civilian or military. The UN requirement for regular reporting on the implementation of international agreements ratified by a country, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), provided women-centred organisations with the opportunity not only to monitor governmental reports but to provide alternative accounts through Shadow Reports when necessary, as was the case in 1999 (NGO Coalition 1999). The

veritable explosion in research and activism in gender and women's studies in the last two decades has been largely an outcome of the organising that has gone on at various levels during the decades.

Another way in which the UN responded to the pressure from women's groups was by calling on governments to set up structures mandated to address women's participation in development – the National Machinery for Women. Africa had already pioneered the establishment of regional structures for women. This was when the UN Economic Commission for Africa, located in Addis Ababa, had set up a programme on women and development and subsequently established the African Training and Research Centre for Women, in 1975. Under the Abacha regime (1993–1998), a Federal Ministry for Women Affairs and Social Development was set up. Already in existence were the National Commission for Women and National Centre for Women Development. Overall, the National Machinery has done little to further gender equity (Mama 2000) and this continues to be the case even now that there has been a handover from military to civilian rule.

#### ***Between the development industry and state structures for women***

The dominant current in mainstream development thinking and policy – WID or Women in Development – has posited that development had 'neglected' women and that the solution to this would be to ensure that women were no longer 'left out'. The gender insensitivity and male bias inherent in such 'development' policies have been challenged by feminists internationally (see e.g. AAWORD 1985; Sen and Grown 1988; Elson 1991). AAWORD's (1985) Nairobi Manifesto had pointed to the destructive effects of 'development' strategies that depended on external finance, technology and advice. The damage as a result of structural adjustment and restrictive monetary policies tied to loan conditionalities, had resulted in a deepening of poverty, food crises, unemployment, massive displacement of populations and a rise in political and religious fundamentalisms. Rising poverty in the context of globalisation has been linked to an upsurge in violence against women (Pereira 2002).

The period during which the first Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were implemented in many African countries was also the period when state structures for women were first developed on a visible scale. Both processes coincided with the first UN Decade for Women (1975–1984). Political regimes were increasingly short of funds during this period; donors, however, were willing to provide money for WID structures and projects. Accordingly, many regimes found it expedient to either create new structures (Mama 1998), co-opt existing structures (Pereira 2000), or combine the two in authoritarian efforts to increase their legitimacy and their access to resources. In Nigeria, the atmosphere regarding women's advancement is only superficially supportive. State discourses on gender have championed a 'better life for rural women' and 'economic advancement for families', through the medium of female power structures deploy-

ing the wives of the military Head of State and state governors (see Mama 1998). First Ladies at different levels have experienced greater visibility and improved material conditions than most other categories of women.

For the vast majority of Nigerian women, however, gender inequity and women's subordination continue to pervade their lives – a phenomenon that is widespread across the continent and indeed, internationally. In Nigeria, this takes the form of pervasive beliefs that women are (men's) 'property', and by extension, minors, whose adult status is mediated via men, primarily the father or husband, but also uncle, brother and so on. In addition, there is the widespread denial of education, land and property rights, and access to credit. In defiance of these oppressions, Nigerian women have continued to organise against a range of oppressive and inhumane practices that do violence to women's bodily integrity and their humanity - such as the battery of women, widowhood rites, child marriage and female genital mutilation – each justified in differing ways by recourse to a complex that variously combines 'Culture/Tradition/Religion' (see e.g. NGO Coalition 1999; WIN [Kaduna] 1999; Pereira 2001a; LACVAW Interim Working Group 2001).

### ***The changing institutional landscape of higher education***

Since universities comprise one of the major sites at which scholarship in gender and women's studies is produced, it is appropriate to ask under what institutional conditions this has taken place. At its inception, the university system in Nigeria was conceived of as a means of producing 'high-level manpower (sic) for the nation'. National Development Plans have continually reiterated the linkage between universities and 'high-level manpower', although the modalities for implementing the Plans have rarely matched the pronouncements. More serious is the non-recognition of the fact that most groups of women have rarely had any say in how 'national' needs are determined and how priorities are set. Even if this were to be officially recognised, there is no guarantee that women's marginalisation would be treated as a serious problem. It is clear from the Plans that an understanding of the realities of the lives of diverse groups of women was not viewed as necessary to planning. Hence, no attention was paid to gender divisions of labour, gender segregated labour markets, and the ubiquity of gender violence in social relations and institutions (Pereira 2001b).

Knowledge production in the university system has been seriously undermined by the generalised underfunding of university education, coupled with the politicisation of the higher education system. *How* the economic resources of a nation are used is fundamentally determined by *who* governs the polity. This fusion of politics and economics – the politics of funding – has repercussions for the kind of university education that is on offer, in other words, its quality. Yet, even in the absence of under funding and politicisation of the system, the ques-

tion of what kind of knowledge is produced, by whom and for what purposes, remains.

From the 1990s to date, the paradigms of knowledge production (Imam and Mama 1994), the pedagogies used, the formation of the institution and the ways in which it is reproduced, have all come under scrutiny. The conception of universities as the breeding ground for the grooming of the nation's elite – leaders who are presumed to be men – is fundamentally at odds with the notion of the university as a site for deconstructing the contradictions in the society at large. The contested nature of the purpose of the university is highlighted by Morley et al., (2001), as are the possibilities of change.

[T]he notion of the purpose of the university [is] contested in different periods and in different regions of the Commonwealth. On the one hand the university has been viewed as ungendered, a site for knowledge to serve national interests and ungendered notions of citizenship. In this guise it is open to primarily quantitative change with regard to including certain formerly excluded groups. On the other hand, the university may be viewed as an institution complicit with the social divisions of the society, but nonetheless open to qualitative change and transformations concerning gendered and other forms of inequity (Morley et al. 2001: 11).

### **Relations between intellectual content and political agenda**

This section addresses some of the ways in which the content of intellectual work and its links to social change may be made explicit. The first part explores the question of relating gender and women's studies to women's interests, and some of the relevant considerations. The second part of the section examines the links between intellectual content and political agenda in two key thematic areas: i) conceptualisations of 'women' and 'gender'; and ii) women's history, biography and autobiography.

#### ***Linking Women's Studies to women's interests?***

Outlining the development of women's studies in Nigeria, Bolanle Awe (1996) provides an overview of changes during the ten-year period beginning in the mid-1980s. Her account attempts to convey the complexities underlying the growth of women's studies and indicates areas for further work and attention. She points to important antecedents in international and regional meetings, such as the Wellesley Conference of 1976 and the 1983 AAWORD Conference on African women and methodology. In Nigeria, the first Women and National Development seminar was held at the University of Ibadan in 1976, to launch the United Nations International Women's Year. During the 1980s, two important seminars on the subject were held. In 1987, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan held a seminar on Women's Studies: The State of the Art Now in



Nigeria. In 1988, a workshop on Theoretical and Methodological Issues in Women's Studies was held at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. These early activities point to the emergence of a field that has since grown considerably in scope. The role of WIN during this period was referred to earlier.

The question of how feminism has been received within the academy is an important one. As an intellectual project that is explicit about its relationship to social transformation, feminism simultaneously combines political as well as intellectual practice. In this respect, it is similar to Marxism. Unlike Marxism, however, feminism has been treated with pronounced hostility within the academy. This hostility has compelled women to create additional institutional sites from which to further the development of feminist knowledge, as we saw earlier in the formation of AAWORD. Even when scholars in gender and women's studies have been unwilling to call themselves feminist, there has been a keen interest in setting up new centres and networks as platforms for information sharing, networking and support.

Within the academy, several institutional structures have been formed, primarily centres for gender and women's studies. They are listed below along with their principal aims:

- Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan – focus for women's studies, documentation, links to other centres
- Centre for Gender and Social Policy Studies, University of Ile-Ife – capacity building in gender, social policy and development
- Women's Studies Unit, University of Nigeria, Nsukka – documentation, teaching and research
- Documentation and Analysis of Women's and Gender Studies Unit, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka – documentation
- Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN)– building capacity for teaching and research in gender and women's studies
- Ahmadu Bello University, Gender and Women's Studies Group, Zaria - documentation, capacity building in gender and women's studies.

All the above are local centres, except for NWSN which is a national network. Virtually all of these sites are struggling with a lack of funds and institutional support, and apart from NWSN, a lack of autonomy in decision making (see Mama 1996). At the 1996 NWSN workshop on 'Concepts and Methodologies for Gender and Women's Studies in Nigeria', Mama (1997a) posed the question of whether research efforts in this field were advancing Nigerian women's interests, and what specific aspects of such endeavours made them succeed or fail. The notion that 'women' were a homogenous group and all shared the same interests needed to be critiqued. A more appropriate approach, she pointed out,

might be to consider the effects of research on different groups of women in Nigeria – ‘rural women’, ‘market women’, ‘women farmers’, ‘women factory workers’, ‘business women’, ‘domestic servants’, ‘women doctors’ and so on. The South African experience highlights the complexity of defining ‘women’s interests’ and forging common interests in the context of considerable heterogeneity in historical experiences of oppression, whether on the basis of gender, race or class (Kemp et al., 1995). Moreover, building consensus in this sphere requires considerable organisational skill and experience.

Addressing questions such as the extent to which gender and women’s studies can further women’s interests or gender equity requires an engagement with the legacies of Nigeria’s political, economic and social history. One of the key dimensions here is militarism and the militarisation of the state. In her analysis of the implications of the militarisation of the state for women, Nina Mba (1989: 86–7) had this to say about the divides among women in the country:

The gap between urban and rural women, between the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ sectors, and between the ‘elite’ and the ‘masses’ is very wide. Urban, educated middle-class women have the national leadership potential but not the mass support needed for effective political action. Besides, the majority of such women insist on the depoliticisation of ‘women’s issues’ and operate within the framework of voluntary associations which cannot enforce sanctions on their members. Urban market women and rural community-based women have the potential for mass mobilization and can enforce effective sanctions, but they lack the national leadership and political objectives.

Faced with divides such as these that still prevail today among Nigerian women, some of the challenges for gender and women’s studies appear to be: to produce the kind of knowledge that will strengthen the agency of diverse categories of women, particularly those impoverished and disempowered within the status quo; to support women’s existing efforts to produce knowledge outside the academy; to facilitate women’s recognition of diverse forms of oppression across social divides; and to strengthen women’s collective efforts to organise effectively across such divides, in support of gender equality and social justice. As an agenda for change, the above intentions will only be effective if consensus is built around their validity, which implies related processes of consensus- and constituency-building.

### ***Relating intellectual content to political agenda***

Although gender and women’s studies has a long history in Nigeria, by the mid-1990s there was no national forum at which the contemporary situation could be reviewed, experiences shared and future plans developed. The Network for Wom-

en's Studies in Nigeria, NWSN, held its inaugural workshop, 'Setting an Agenda for Gender and Women's Studies in Nigeria' in January 1996, with the aim of addressing these concerns (Mama 1996a). A key aspect of those concerns was to set up a process for developing a national agenda on research that would be oriented to the growth and development of gender and women's studies in the country. This paper is intended to contribute to this larger aim.

In this section, I address two key thematic areas: i) conceptualisations of 'women' and 'gender'; and ii) women's history, biography and autobiography. The choice of themes is clearly selective, being limited by time and resources. However, the selection of these two themes as starting points for this project are shaped, firstly, by the significance of conceptualisation for intellectual as well as political concerns. How social realities are understood will determine the strategies used by interested parties, to change these realities. Greater effectiveness at transforming the realities affecting women and gender relations requires critical analysis of how such concepts are being used in the literature, their strengths and limitations. Secondly, since the literature on women's history, biography and autobiography is rich in Nigeria, and has moreover, been drawn on as a contemporary source of inspiration to women in difficult times, it calls out for focused attention.

#### *Conceptualisations of 'women' and 'gender'*

At the second NWSN workshop, held in November 1996, the need to re-examine the basic terms and concepts used in gender and women's studies in Nigeria was raised. Instead of assuming the content of these terms and concepts, Mama pointed out that it would be necessary to do the work of developing our own usages of basic terms and concepts, grounding them in local realities. The idea would be to develop existing concepts, thereby making them 'more meaningful and effective tools for analyzing and comprehending the oppression and subordination of women and the nature of gender relations in Nigeria' (Mama 1997b: 3). This discussion took place at a workshop at which participants deliberated upon the following concepts: 'woman' and women's struggles, 'gender', 'feminism' and feminist theory.

One of the key texts in research on gender is *Female Husbands, Male Daughters* by Ifi Amadiume (1987). Working in the South East of Nigeria, Amadiume examined the ideology of gender in the socio-cultural systems of Nnobi from the nineteenth century through to the post-independence period. The author also studied the effects of gender ideology on the structural position of women in the society. Her research indicates that the dual sex principle behind social organisation in the indigenous society was mediated by a flexible gender system of traditional culture and language. Biological sex was not synonymous with ideological gender. Amadiume points out that this flexibility allowed women to play

roles usually monopolised by men, or to be classified as 'males' in terms of power and authority over others. Since such roles were not rigidly cast as either masculine or feminine, breaking gender rules did not result in stigma. The acceptance of women as having roles of authority and power, and the status associated with such roles was supported by an all-embracing goddess-focused religion.

Whilst Amadiume's work usefully destabilises conceptualisations of sex and gender by showing that gender is not shaped by sex in a unilinear fashion in Nnobi, she does not interrogate the ways in which flexibility and relations of domination were configured. For example, flexibility *per se* did not allow women the same degree of power relative to men of the same social standing. Women who were classified as 'male daughters' required the consent of men in the father's patrilineage to be so recognised or, if not, recognition could only be attained through the statutory legal process. Female husbands were women who acquired wives by virtue of their economic strength and thereby controlled the labour and services of their wives. Woman-to-woman marriage was literally translated as 'buying a slave'. Amadiume assures us that the term referred only to woman-to-woman marriage and not man-to-woman marriage, and that the woman who was bought had the status and customary rights of a wife. Amadiume makes no comment on the apparent overlap in meaning between 'wife' and 'slave' (or some wives and slaves), nor does she explore the perceived benefits of woman-to-woman marriage to the women married to female husbands, even as she regrets the demise of such 'pro-female' institutions with the onset of colonialism and Christianity.

The author's perspective on the relations between intellectual content and political agenda are nonetheless stated quite clearly:

Any work by Third World women must therefore be political, challenging the new and growing patriarchal systems imposed on our societies through colonialism and Western religious and educational influences. We cannot afford to be indifferent researchers, glossing over the local struggles in which women in our countries are involved. As well as looking into the socio-cultural systems which guaranteed women power ... African and other Third World women still have a role to play in exposing the contradictions in their societies, recording their own social history with a view to challenging where necessary, discrimination against women and positively aiming for more power for women and more egalitarian societies for everyone (Amadiume 1987:9).

In Northern Nigeria, the invisibility of women and with it, the whole question of gender relations has been 'refracted through the prism of seclusion' (Imam 1994: 26). This scenario has framed Imam's choice of seclusion itself as a focus of

research attention. She argues that the focus of analysis should be the social relations of gender, that is, the relations between women and men as they are manifested in terms of power, economics, ideology and so on. Moreover, gender relations need to be understood as they interact with other dimensions of social and economic relations, such as class and ethnicity, to impinge on the positions of women as well as men.

Imam's research shows that the generalisation of women's seclusion during colonialism developed as a result of complex interactions between the religious and political ideologies that were mobilised against the colonial state, and the economic changes brought about by capitalism. These economic changes catalysed changes in the gender division of labour and social relations within Hausaland. It was not Islam *per se* that produced seclusion in Northern Nigeria, as is often argued, but the ways in which particular Muslim discourses were elaborated and became dominant whilst being structured into divisions of labour, relations of production and other social practices. Ideologies of seclusion cut across and overlapped those of femininity and masculinity, the nature of marital relations, ethnicity, religion and status, none of these being uniform or uncontested (Imam 1994).

Imam is quite explicit about the relationship between intellectual content and political agenda, as she sees it:

...I want to draw together the threads of the discussion so far. But, I want to do so with a specific purpose in mind – to see what the implications of this study are for informing practice aimed at change. I begin by reviewing the understandings reached about seclusion, past and contemporary. Then I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the relationships between ideological processes, social relations and historical change that implicitly sustain my analysis. Finally, I conclude with some speculations on praxis and the future of seclusion (Imam 1994: 199).

At the national level, the ways in which hegemonic discourses of womanhood have been constructed and deployed in an urban sphere have been of some interest (Pereira 2000). This sphere is the one occupied by the official umbrella women's organisation in Nigeria, the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), in its relations with the military state. Whilst the NCWS has effectively reified women as wives and mothers within the existing social order, this has been done primarily to legitimise women's incursion into masculinist, formal public spheres. The actual construction of motherhood evident in NCWS pronouncements and actions reflect different currents underlying its ideology and organisation. These include elements derived from missionary and colonial discourse constructing the mother as the ultimate line of defence against the disruptive forces

of modernity alongside elements from the developmentalist legacy inherited from the nationalist period (see Pereira 1997b).

However, allusions to motherhood have had the effect of naturalising and universalising conceptions of appropriate ways of being for women, and appropriate relations with men. This obscures the heterogeneity amongst women in their social positioning, their experiences of motherhood (for those who are mothers), and their interests. It also obscures the extent to which the discursive elements of womanhood utilised by the NCWS have been shaped by the history and politics of the organisation, the class interests of the dominant groups of women within it, and their relations with the state (Pereira 2000). The political agenda in this research was twofold: i) to illustrate how hegemonic and conservative conceptions of 'the way women should be' have been socially and historically constructed; and ii) to destabilise the widespread notion that such ways are either 'natural' or 'universal'.

Writing from a different perspective, Oyewumi (1997) questions the assumption that African societies are structured by gender, as are Euro-American societies. Oyewumi advances the thesis that it is seniority, rather than gender, that orders and divides Yoruba society. Her argument rests on two planks: one, that the Yoruba language is not marked by gender; second, that Yoruba social institutions and practices do not make social distinctions in terms of anatomical differences. On the basis of this argument, Oyewumi goes on to state that the concept of gender is not useful for understanding Yoruba society.

Oyewumi's argument needs to be evaluated against its own claims. Yusuf (2002) provides a useful critique, identifying three major weaknesses in the methodology that Oyewumi uses in order to make her claims. The first is the importance ascribed to language as revealing a cultural essence - the idea that the original meanings of words lie beneath the surface of colonial distortions and can be discerned if only the appropriate methods were used. A more accurate account of how words convey their meaning would take account of the multiple changes and instabilities in the way words are used over time. Otherwise, the political danger is one of supporting an approach to language and culture that claims authenticity (for some), as tyrants such as Mobutu have felt free to do.

The second weakness is the privileging of seniority as the only significant dimension of power. In line with feminist and post-structural approaches to power, Yusuf suggests that different modes of power are interwoven and always working in concert. Oyewumi's lack of consideration of the intersections of diverse modes of power means that she cannot account for the complexity of micro-politics or the nuances of seniority as they actually operate and are experienced by different social categories of people. The political significance here is that the ways in which the ideology of seniority can be, and often is, used to mask abusive forms of power relations, is obliterated from the account.

Finally, Yusuf shows how Oyewumi reduces social reality – the different ways in which seniority is negotiated in practice – to the explicit discourse privileging seniority. In the process, the difference between regulatory frameworks and what actually happens in practice is eliminated, as is the possibility of tracing the workings of ideology. Yusuf refers to the need to place discourse *within* the context of practice and make visible the ways in which the relations between the two are negotiated and manipulated. If this is not done, the political danger is that of repressing differences and silences, whilst being trapped within the terms of the very ideology that is the focus of study.

Efforts to conceptualise gender need to go beyond showing that gender has not been constructed historically in the same ways in Africa, specifically Nigeria, compared to the West. One would indeed expect that this would be the case. What is of greater interest, however, is the significance of particular conceptualisations of gender, in terms of how this expands or restricts the possibilities for diverse categories of women and men, given the social conditions of their time. It is on terrain such as this that the question of the relations between the intellectual content produced by researchers and the political agenda/s associated with that content, is located.

Nigerian women's experiences are structured by multiple lines of power and division other than gender, such as class, age, ethnicity, religion, region and so on, each of these being foregrounded and changing in differing ways according to time, place and so on. It is also the case historically that this multiplicity has often been collapsed into singular divisions such as ethnicity or religion, defined in masculinist terms. The interplay between co-existing lines of division, the implications of all this in terms of how diverse categories of women understand their experiences, and the differences between their living conditions and those of other categories of women and diverse categories of men – all these are yet to be theorised and understood. One may surmise that as intellectual content becomes more nuanced, so too should the political agenda and the strategies required to realise that agenda.

#### *Women's history, biography and autobiography*

The rest of this section explores the relations between intellectual content and political agenda in the thematic area of women's history, biography and autobiography. The convergence of these three areas in women's studies in Nigeria is a reflection of developments in the field, such as the push for 'herstories' in historiography as a means of compensating for the invisibility of women in the discipline (Awe 1991).

By the early 1970s, the contours of African historiography were expanding to include women's experiences and engagements as well as the analysis of the role of gender in African history. The first identifiable text on Nigerian women was written by Oshunshye in 1960. The fact that the article was written by a man

prompted some interest in women as a focus of research among male historians. Other landmark works were Afigbo's (1972) analysis of the 1929 Women's War, Okonjo's (1976) study of the dual sex system in Eastern Nigeria, Alagoa's oral history of Queen Kambasa, which remained unpublished until it was included in Awe's (1992) edited collection, and more recently, Denzer's (1998) work on the Iyalode in South Western Nigeria.

The only book on women's history remains Nina Mba's (1982) classic text, which documents and analyses women's political activity in Southern Nigeria from 1900 to 1965. In the context of twentieth century Nigerian political history relegating the role of women to footnotes, the focus on women as a separate category has been necessary to redress the imbalance. Mba also situates the validity of her research on the existence of role differentiation based on sex, which existed to varying degrees in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial societies of South Eastern and South Western Nigeria. Her research focuses on the motivations and self-images of women engaged in political activity, as well as the objectives, organisation, leadership and effectiveness of women's protest movements and political associations. Mba was particularly interested in the effects of historical change on the political positions and roles of women in Southern Nigeria.

There is a rich vein of biographical writing in women's studies in Nigeria. Importantly, biographies and autobiographies have registered an emphasis on social history and processes. Full-length biographies include those of Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997), Lady Kofoworola Ademola (Rosiji 1996), Hafsatu Ahmadu Bello (Adamu 1995), Margaret Ekpo (Effah-Attoe and Jaja 1993), Gambo Sawaba (Shawulu 1990). A number of autobiographies are also available, such as those of Sulia Adedeji (1995) and Irene Ighodaro (1994). Shorter biographical accounts include those of Nana Asma'u (Koko and Boyd 2001), Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Awe 2001), Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa (Olusanya 2001a), Olaniwun Adunni Olawole (Olusanya 2001b), Lady Oyinkan Abayomi (Johnson-Odim 2001). In addition, several student projects at graduate and undergraduate levels exist (see Denzer 1995: xviii-xix).

The focus of much biographical work in Nigeria has largely been the leadership of women who succeeded in achieving public prominence. Rosiji's (1996) biographical portrait of Lady Kofoworola Ademola, growing up as a member of a privileged Lagos family in the 1920s, depicts her subsequent engagement in voluntary work and promotion of the educational advancement of women. Lady Ademola was a founder member of organisations such as the National Council for Women's Societies and the National Association of University Women, both prominent, if not radical, organisations in the following decades.

Unlike many of the women above who were prominent in their time, Hafsatu Ahmadu Bello, the first wife of the Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello, lived her life far from the public eye. Hafsatu's distinctive qualities, according to those who knew her, were patience and submissiveness - qualities consid-



ered ideal for a 'good woman'. She was killed along with her husband in the first of Nigeria's military coups, on the night of January 14–15, 1966. Based on oral recollections, interviews and archival sources, Adamu's (1995) account documents Hafsatu Bello's life in the context of her family background and marriage in Hausaland. The events of the night of the coup are recalled from the point of view of several different actors.

Studies of the lives and activities of prominent Nigerian women have generally been motivated by a desire to create alternative role models for women in the present as well as registering women's presence in the official accounts of history. Awe (2001: xi) states that 'An understanding of women's activities in historical perspective ... provides one useful avenue for an understanding of the possibilities of their involvement in modern development'. Johnson-Odim (2001: 187) refers to 'the great variety of roles which women in Nigeria have played in the shaping of their nation and people', and that awareness of this can serve as 'an inspiration to the women of the present'. From this, the emphasis in biographical work on past female leaders may be viewed as a reflection of their dearth in the post-colonial state in particular, as well as in the broader society. Implicit in the perspectives articulated by Awe and Johnson-Odim is the notion that women's biographies suggest possibilities for social change. An understanding of the lives of women who have been leaders in the past provides pointers to women aspiring to leadership in the present and to women in their struggles to change contemporary gender relations.

The political role of biographies is thus clearly foregrounded, with the emphasis on the *content* of women's lives and the ways in which a more informed understanding of history could serve the present. Whilst these are clearly important dimensions of both the intellectual content and the political agenda of this strand in women's studies, other important dimensions are less often considered. These are questions such as those of interpretive authority and representation – whose voice interprets experience and is recognised as the voice of authority in the text, and clarifying the basis for speaking on behalf of someone else. Also significant is the question of agency, specifically the agency of the woman whose biography is being written – her choices, her decisions, in the context of her interpretations of the options before her (see Lewis 2002).

The carefully researched biography of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti by Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba (1997) is an example of a biography where considerable attention was paid to the relations between subjectivity and history. Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba (1997: xiv) refer to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti as 'a strong personality who helped make history'; in their biography they hoped to convey 'both the personal and political aspects of her life and of her role in history'. The authors sensitively portray the agency of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in the nuances of motivation, intention and action, immersed as these were in the social context of her time.

Biographies and life histories of women in the public eye have provided alternative depictions of womanhood from those typically encountered in hegemonic constructions of gender relations, not only in their own time but also in the present. Women such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, Margaret Ekpo, Olaniwun Adunni Olawole and others outside Nigeria, like Constance Cummings-John, were not only leaders of women but active in the masculinist sphere of national politics. As such, they were living proof that women need not confine themselves to the domestic sphere, as colonialist gender ideology would have it, but could exercise leadership on multiple fronts. Clearly, knowledge of the lives of such women provides a point of departure for countering the widespread tendency to derogate as 'foreign' or 'Western' any form of women's activism that subverts conventional understandings of appropriate gender relations.

At the same time as they destabilise hegemonic constructions of womanhood, biographies of prominent women such as Gambo Sawaba, Constance Cummings-John, Irene Ighodaro, Lady Kofoworola Aina Ademola, also depict the porous character of the boundaries of nations, ethnic and cultural groups. Inter-marriage, migration and the return of ex-slaves to the African continent are some of the means of straddling these borders, revealing the differing ways in which collectivities are characterised less by stasis or clear-cut lines of division than by indeterminacy and flux. Whilst this particular thread in women's biographies could be taken further to challenge masculinist orientations towards the study of 'the nation' and ethnicity in Nigeria, this has not yet happened in an explicit manner. Understanding the ways in which the personal relations of African women were shaped by the dynamics of nation, ethnicity, cultural groupings and so on would benefit from further analysis of the relations between biography, social history, politics and women's struggles.

### **Trajectories for the future**

Several possible trajectories may be discerned, not necessarily exclusive, which vary according to the political direction that intellectual work takes. I have distinguished two broad spheres in which such trajectories may be located: i) de-radicalising the agenda, and ii) retaining a feminist vision. Some of the possibilities within these spheres are outlined briefly below.

#### ***De-radicalising the agenda***

This is by far the most likely trajectory. This section outlines three spheres in which scholars and activists may find themselves engaging with deradicalised agendas concerning women and gender relations.

*Servicing the state*

There is considerable diversity in the ways in which researchers and activists may have their energies spent in service of the state. The significant feature here is the determination of the interaction and the agenda by the relevant state agency, as opposed to engagement of state institutions by civil society organisations with their self-determined agendas in a process of negotiation.

Servicing the state may involve interactions differentiated by diverse forms of service, with any one of a range of institutions, over varied time spans. Some examples will suffice here. Scholars may be invited to 'participate' in governmental tasks, such as a request by the Ministry of Women's Affairs to complete long-overdue reports on CEDAW within a fortnight, when the reporting cycle is expected to be carried out over years. Alternatively, they could be asked by the Women's Centre to validate reports of projects they played no part in designing or monitoring. Some might be asked to implement WID projects without being previously involved in their formulation. Scholars may be given a few days' notice to present a paper at high-profile meetings intended to promote the image of the Minister of Women's Affairs, where media coverage and the presence of 'big men' and 'big women' matter more than intellectual and political substance. International Women's Day provides a good opportunity for such meetings. A non-governmental organisation may be involved in supporting a female legislator in her preparations for a Public Hearing at the National Assembly, and never get paid for the work months after it has been successfully executed.

*Driven by donors*

The most likely scenario is that of short-term consultancies, usually with restricted terms of reference, concerning a range of aspects to do with gender and/or women. The key point here is the remarkable obsession on the part of donors with 'quick fix', technical solutions, unmarred by considerations of power relations or political complexities. Recurrent characteristics in the approaches taken include the tendency to define both the problem and the most likely sources of change *externally* i.e. by the donor, who often has less experience and understanding of the problems concerned than those on the ground. In addition to this, there is the tendency to focus on singular strategies and courses of action, all to be implemented within the funding cycle of the particular donor agency concerned, in order to count as success. There is a formidable lack of concern with developing nuanced and grounded understandings of what are usually multifaceted, complex problems that interlock with several other structures and processes. In this context, it takes some ideological clarity and willingness to go against the grain in order to withstand the pressures to carry out the 'quick and dirty' depoliticised servicing that is called for.

*Professionalising gender and women's studies?*

The Social Science Academy of Nigeria (SSAN) recently set up a two-week Gender Institute modeled on the lines of the CODESRIA Gender Institute. The motivation for this initiative is rooted largely in the high demand for gender training among researchers and scholars in Nigeria, as evident in the large number of applications from Nigerians for CODESRIA's Gender Institute. As a result, the Academy decided to replicate a similar programme in Nigeria (SSAN 2000). The following questions are of particular salience for what appears to be a process of professionalisation of gender studies: What informs participants' reasons for applying to the Gender Institute? Will the fact that gender studies is being embraced by the Social Science Academy of Nigeria result in its depoliticisation? Or was the depoliticisation of gender studies a condition for its acceptance in the first place?

In addition, two new centres have been set up with the support of the Academy, each with their own journal. One of the centres is the Women Resource Centre (WOREC) at Imo State University, which has published the first edition of the WOREC *Journal of Gender Studies*. The second centre is the Centre for Gender Studies at Benue State University, which has come out with the first issue of the *Review of Gender Studies in Nigeria*. The quality of each of these journals leaves much to be desired. One may well ask what considerations informed the choice of institutions to support, and how the decision to support centres in gender and women's studies at each of the above universities, was arrived at. Both universities are state universities, which are even more poorly funded than federal universities. What place does the role of income generation for the universities play in their inception? Why should institutions be supported to carry out poor quality work? Or will it be argued that this could not have been foreseen? What standards are being set for gender and women's studies, and by whom? Are these standards 'lower' than for other intellectual fields? Where does this leave us regarding an apparent process of 'professionalisation'?

***Retaining a feminist vision***

Holding on to a feminist vision that can inspire action for change is something that feminists continue to do in Nigeria, often in isolation and under hostile conditions. Changing this situation will not be easy but some of the conditions required for doing so include a strengthening and diversification of institutional bases as well as the formation of organic links between research and activism. I outline each of these dimensions below.

*Creating autonomous spaces*

Autonomous spaces for gender and women's studies in Nigeria are rare. Of the six organisational sites referred to earlier, the only autonomous space is the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria. The Network engages in capacity building

for teaching and research in gender and women's studies. Being autonomous, however, does not guarantee any security in terms of sustaining the Network. Perennial difficulties arise in fund raising, communication and finding a balance between the high numbers of prospective participants in activities that are intended to be carried out in small groups.

The other five centres of gender and women's studies are located in larger institutional structures that exercise overall decision-making powers. This gives the centres very little leeway to determine their own priorities and plans. Developing organisational strategies to strengthen these centres in a direction that is capable of retaining a feminist agenda, would be a key aim. To date, this aim has yet to be realised.

In this context, the support that is available from regional networking, such as the initiatives of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, cannot be underestimated. These include the Feminist Studies Network organised around a listserve and occasional workshops, the new journal *Feminist Africa*, and the bibliographic reviews such as that produced by Lewis (2002). In addition, the international conferences held in the region in the year 2002, such as the Women's Worlds Congress held at the University of Makerere, Kampala and the KnowHow conference held at the same time, provide invaluable opportunities for the sharing of information, building of networks, purchase of books and other texts, and general support and solidarity.

*Strengthening links between gender/women's studies and women's activism*

There is a need to address the content of gender and women's studies scholarship, through more systematic analyses of gender politics at various levels and institutional sites. This needs to be integrated into research and teaching. The sites involved include households, communities, community groups, women's autonomous organisations, social movements, political parties, religious and ethnic groups, non-governmental organisations, institutions of the state, international organisations of diverse kinds and so on. It would also be important to analyse sources of complicity among researchers/gender activists and state/donor agency discourses in gender politics.

At the level of forging connections between research and activism, more needs to be done. Whilst recognising that research and activism are part of a continuum rather than being partitioned from one another, it is also the case that not all researchers engage in activism, and the converse is true for activists engaging in research. In any case, there are real difficulties in devoting sufficient time and energy to carrying out research when one is engaged in activism, and vice versa. Combining both activities also requires knowledge of relevant organisations, the forging of organisational links and ongoing networking. Some advocacy organisations include research amongst their activities, as a prelude to action. Less common is the existence of university-based researchers engaging with women-cen-

tred organisations beyond the academy. Although this is happening in some instances, it is not the norm. A more concerted effort at understanding women's activism – its content, form and direction – would suggest possibilities and agendas for the mutual honing of research as well as action (see Pereira 2002b).

These difficulties notwithstanding, strengthening the links between women's studies and women's organising can take place in different ways. One way would be to create issue-based platforms that would provide opportunities for a range of groups (activists, researchers, policy makers, and so on) to meet, share ideas and possibly work on collaborative activities. Such efforts need to be planned, sustained and funded, in other words, well organised. Raising the funds for such activities is not easy, given the politics of donor funding and the vagaries of shifting funding priorities. Donor agencies are rarely willing to envisage the coming together of groups (e.g. researchers and women's rights activists) that may be considered quite separately in their funding plans and programmes. Alternatively, activists may take part in fora for building the capacity of researchers to engage in gender and women's studies, as researchers might do for activists. This is easier to do and is happening in a few instances but tends to be individualised. There is no organised forum at present.

### Concluding remarks

The larger project, within which this essay is situated, includes review and analysis of the literature addressing a broader range of thematic areas, each to be covered in some depth. These include themes such as development and the policy arena; politics, the state and militarism; violence against women; religion, culture and the state; sexuality, culture and identity.

I end this essay, not with conclusive statements, but with some questions to think about in terms of discerning future directions that gender and women's studies might take in Nigeria, as in other national contexts:

- What are the social, political and cultural parameters that might determine the effectiveness or failure of gender and women's studies?
- What is the contradictory impact of gender and women's studies, that is, their role in legitimising and sanitising the rule of the regime?
- What is the role of political repression or the way in which complicity is secured with state policies?
- What are the political limits that determine what can or cannot be taken up as issues of women's concern?
- What are the limits of gender and women's studies in Nigeria? To what extent is it playing a constructive role in the struggle for democracy, cultural and political pluralism?

It is the overall configuration of responses to questions such as these (which have not conventionally been part of gender and women's studies in Nigeria) that will highlight potential trajectories for the future.

#### Note

- \* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 10th General Assembly of CODESRIA, 'Africa in the New Millennium', 8–12 December 2002, Kampala, Uganda. It is also published online by the African Gender Institute at <http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/pereira.html>

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