

Prof. Iyabo Olojede

African Journal of Management & Development

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Competitiveness and National Development.
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African Journal of Management and Development
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CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN THE IVORY TOWER

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This paper is part of an on-going work on Challenges of Women Studies in the Discipline of Public Administration

INTRODUCTION

Women's studies grew out of women's political movement in Europe. During the 1970's western feminists in universities sought to occupy space in power positions in those almost exclusively occupied by men, with the sole aim of translating this positively to women's empowerment. A category of women sought the inauguration of certified courses in women's studies in the existing institutions of formal education. Another category sought effecting organizational change whereby more women will be appointed as part of the workforce as well as high ranking officials involved in the administration of higher education.

In Africa, the emergence of women's studies can be traced to several influences. Amongst these are the influence of the international women's movement, development industry, national and sub-regional political conditions, the crisis in African education and the emergence of state feminism (Mama, 1999:21).

In Africa, Nigeria inclusive, the emergence of women's studies has been linked to national and regional governmental structures which were contrary to European experience where women's studies were inspired by feminists. The first major institutional sponsor of gender research in Africa was the Economic Commission for Africa which established the African Training and Research Centre for Women, established in 1979.

Given the lack of nexus between women's movement and the creation of women's studies, women's studies in many African universities run the risk

of being reduced to an expedience utilized by undemocratic regimes seeking legitimacy and a donor driven phenomenon irrelevant to African women (Mama, 1999:22).

The hostility of African elites to the idea of women's liberation and feminism has not been helpful to the autonomous development of women's studies in Africa. Men, generally (with the exception of a minority), consider women's liberation a foreign currency untenable in the African soil. Women's liberation advocates are considered 'braburners', men haters, a eccentric and frustrated women far removed from African concept of womanhood. The real African woman from the general African sense is a passive, obedient and tolerant of all abuses (infidelity, domestic violence etc). Her ambition should be good mothering and maintenance of a stable marriage and taking good care of her husband. Others have argued that African women do not have problems as long as they obey their husbands.

Women are faced with more fundamental problems which ought to be addressed intellectually from indepth women's studies emanating from collective concerns and interests of women. The challenge facing women's studies is how to first find anchorage in the ivory tower as well as strengthen its links between theory and the reality of the women's situation. It is this challenge among others that this paper addresses.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

This section examines relevant concepts germane to this paper. Firstly is the distinction between sex and gender. Sex has a physiological description. It refers to biological attributes, hormones, chromosomes and others. Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics or roles of males and females in a given society as distinguished from biologically determined sex.

Gender focuses on the social relations between women and men. It is also the global asymmetry which reflects the male and female relationship in terms of sex roles and power sharing, decision making and division of labour (Scott 1986). Gender is the social organization of sexual difference. As succinctly put by Scott (1986), gender does not mean fixed and natural physical differences between men and women; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups and time.

Feminist scholars have argued that gender entities are situated both in time and place with the content of masculinities and feminities changing over time. It has been proven that there can be more than one gender associated with biological sex. For example, Amadiume (1987) revealed that at one time in South East Nigeria, there were female husbands and male daughters.

It therefore follows that gender studies will refer to investigations into the social construction of gender, as well as the philosophical, biological and psychological basis resulting in inequities in social, economic, political and educational status of men and women in society. Gender studies tackle holistically the problems of men relative to women and women relative to men. Gender studies appear to sound more academic, more respectable, less political and merely acceptable within the ivory tower more than women's studies. Women's studies as a concept is shrouded in controversies because of people's conception and misconception about the term. Some antagonists have argued: why not men's studies? Others have also argued that focusing on women being "added in" without any fundamental transformation of academic discipline taking place. Women's studies has been defined as an academic search for the biological, sociological, and psychological basis of women's lives and foster gender equality. This search for women's improvement is occurring in some disciplines where women's concerns are tackled. In sociology investigations are often conducted via subjects such as:

- Women and the Society
- Women, Culture and Human Rights
- Women Sexuality and Gender Relations
- Psychological and Sociological Fundamentals of Gender

In the discipline of education, women's issues upon which investigations are carried out revolve around the following:

Women and the Girl Child Education
Women, Science and Technology
Women and the Professions

In the United Kingdom, there are two dominant approaches to teaching women's studies. Women's issues may be incorporated into existing courses through revising course contents and materials. The second approach is to create special courses in women's studies. These two approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive contents, one approach may be more feasible than the other at any given point in time.

University of Liverpool exemplifies these two approaches. In the Department of Sociology, there are a number of specialist courses on offer, such as the undergraduate options: gender and law, gender and sexuality, gender at work and women in the third world with similar options available in the post graduate programmes to the same vein, gender issues have been integrated into virtually every compulsory optional module, so that students are exposed to this perspective without actively seeking out specialized courses. This infusion approach prevents those who teach and study women's studies from being marginalized from main stream orthodox part of the discipline. Secondly, a gender periscope often poses a fundamental and transformative challenge to much of the established wisdom on the discipline in question. Thirdly, students without prior knowledge of the study of gender/women's issues are drawn into this area of studies and debate.

In the United States, the United Kingdom approaches are also dominant. In some universities in the United States, specialist courses in women's studies are taught. For example, Department of Public Administration, University of Alaska, South East, Women and Gender Studies are taught as specialist courses in the Master of Public Administration programme, a similar pattern is also observed in the Department of Public Administration at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.

In Nigeria, the two mayor approaches which are earlier identified in the United Kingdom and the United States are being adopted. In University of Maiduguri, specialist courses are taught separately in the Department of Sociology, English and Education. In the Sociology Department of the University two separate specialist courses are taught namely: Women and Society and Women in Development are taught at the undergraduate level. In the English Department, a course on Feminist Writers is taught at the undergraduate level, and the Education Department has a course on Women in Higher Education at the postgraduate level. At the University of Lagos, the Sociology Departments teaches two courses at the undergraduate level. The courses are: Women in Society and Family and Society.

In the History Department, Women and Colonialism is taught as a course and in the English Department, a course on Feminist Writers is taught. In Lagos State University, the Department of Sociology offers separate courses at the undergraduate level: Women in Society and Family Studies. At the post graduate level, the Department offers post graduate programme in Women's Studies. In the Department of Politics! Science, an infusion strategy is being adopted whereby the first introductory course in Political Science titled: Introduction to Political Science is infused with topics such as Women in Politics and Women in Political Science. In the Department of Public Administration, at the postgraduate level, there is a separate course on Women and Public Management. The course essentially treats women's entry into public management, barriers hindering women's entry and survival of women top public managers. The programme participants are usually drawn from top and middle echelons of the public and private sectors. Since the participants are usually top policy implementers the course is targeted at creating awareness of problems facing women in public management.

CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

The first main challenge that women's studies face at all fronts is the male bias or androcentrism that prevails in all disciplines (Mies, 1983; 1991). This androcentrism is manifested not only in the fact that universities are still largely male dominated but more subtly in the choice of area of research policies, theoretical concepts and particularly in research methodology. The inadequacy of dominant research method was first raised by feminist historians who try to reconstruct women's history. Women's contribution to history is hardly recorded in the history books. Given the framework of science that is built on written records only, this means that their contribution does not exist as far as historical science goes. It is this experience which has given rise to the expression of the "hidden women". Earlier attempts of women to raise this problem posed by methodological problems in-built in the quantitative survey method led to the adoption of feminist methodology in which women are to form small groups in which they reflect collectively on their experience, in this way women's understanding of their situation can be politicized. This intellectual change was considered a pre-requisite for the political action necessary to complete the liberation of women, hence the term consciousness raising groups.

African universities appear slow in responding to the adoption of feminist science because they are constrained by practical and political imperatives which stifle intellectual innovation. As Mama (1999:422) noted, grand theories still dominate the universities' curriculum and quantitative methods are still almost universally regarded as more scientific.

However the Network of Women's Studies in Nigeria inaugurated in 1996 has been in the forefront in setting agenda for gender and women's studies. The network through its numerous conferences has adopted relevant feminist methodology theories appropriate for the Nigerian environment.

Another major challenge faced by women's studies is non-recognition in many universities across the globe. Until recently, women's studies have been dismissed as non-essential in many institutions. For example in the United States, the suggestion to put together a special women's studies section in the reference collection at the Library of Congress was dismissed in the late 1970s (Pritchard,200) Pritchard further observed that providing women's studies browsing collection in undergraduate libraries is an idea that gets little support.

Ityavayar (1999:40) succinctly identified major challenges faced by women's studies in Nigerian universities. Firstly is their un-acceptance by the universities senate. Ordinarily introduction of new courses is generally difficult talkless of a new "eccentric" course like women's studies. This difficulty is heightened by the monitoring role of the National Universities Commission and the male dominated senate. Secondly, the poor funding of the Universities makes the introduction of extra courses unaffordable and women's studies courses are not considered as priority. Thirdly, many parents are uncomfortable with women's studies. Parents cannot differentiate between radical feminism and women's studies. They confuse activism with academic practice. Other challenges identified by Ityavayar are lack of qualified and experienced women's studies experts, lack of qualified and experienced teachers, lack of relevant local teaching materials and the general misconceptions by male students of what women's studies is all about.

Olojede (2007) has identified another major challenge which is the lack of nexus between scholars of women's studies in the universities and the activities in the real world. For example, in Nigeria, several departments are carrying out researches and teaching in women's students with little or

no input from activists.

Women's studies should not be seen as a new target for research by women's studies scholars or as another discipline where students are taking up women's issues. For women's studies to contribute to the course of women's emancipation, women's studies scholars must forge an alliance with the activists on the field. They must consciously remember that as women, they are also affected by sexists' oppressions together with other women. Scholarship must therefore be utilized to further women's emancipation.

CONCLUSION

Despite the numerous barriers faced by women's studies, the enterprise has come to stay worldwide. There is a prodigious production of feminists' publications in Europe, United States, and Africa. Nigeria is also not left behind as witnessed in the array of publications on women's studies across the disciplines of Sociology, Education, Political Science, Public Administration, Law and others. Many young male scholars are also engaging in research in women studies. Some of these male scholars are genuinely committed to the improvement of women's lives while some of them are driven by donors' dollars.

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