

Doing Gender and Feminist Research in Developing Countries: The African Context

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1. Introduction

This article is generated from the author's perspective of being an African female gender researcher, scholar and teacher educator. The article is informed by a wide experience in interacting not only with African colleagues based in Africa but also with non-African colleagues who prescribe to feminism as the tool that bears relatively greater potential in unleashing women's and men's capabilities and to free them attitudinally and otherwise to challenge gender inequalities within social systems. For students of gender and education, the role of feminism in their own research is not always clear as they often get caught up in ideological confusion infused in some of their mentors' engagements in the interrogation of the concept of *feminism*, its derivative terminologies and the essence of its agenda in African gender research. In the area of feminist and gender research -as many African scholars may testify it is commonplace, at one time or other, to encounter resistance to, or suspicion about the use of the concept of *feminism* and its inherent agenda to pursue the course of women. This is mainly because feminism – as a social movement- is often perceived as a Western idea, and therefore 'alien' in all intent and purposes and consequently a threat to the perceived African cultural and traditional norms of governing gender relations. More directly, feminism is perceived as a potential risk in the construction of African masculinities which are often founded on patriarchal ideologies and consequently juxtaposed as polar opposites to African femininities. Some African critiques of the feminist movement argue that addressing women's issues *vis-à-vis* those of men outside the context of African and colonial histories only succeeds in camouflaging the racial dimension that makes the African woman's experience of womanhood fundamentally different from that of her Western counterpart. In these circumstances, it is imperative that in researching gender and its related constructs – more so, gender relations within the African context- the concept of feminism be adequately addressed and understood as both a unifying and distinguishing factor in women's experiences of subordination. Thus, the questions of **what is feminism**, **who are feminists** and **what do feminists do**, become necessarily pertinent in the understanding of the role of feminist and gender research within a well defined framework. As hooks (1984 & 1997) observes, it is important to allow the stepping out of the mainstream feminist debates to allow novel ways of engaging with feminist thought allowing for the analyses of all aspects of women's domination and helping to reflect on the needs and experiences of non-white and working-class women with non-western histories and experiences.

2. What Is Feminist Research?

Feminist research should be understood as the scientific and scholarly exploration/investigation of social relations seeking to generate knowledge that draws distinctly on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men. Hence, experiential (phenomenological) data that is necessarily qualitative in nature is a peculiar feature of feminist research. One of the key specific purposes of feminist research is to seek answers to the 'why' types of questions that arise out of 'what' is already known about the subordinate positioning of women within patriarchal gender relations of power. The methods used to answer the questions of 'what' and 'why' about women's subordination need to incorporate the question of 'how' this subordination comes about and *how* the situation may be transformed, changed or improved in ways that would help eradicate subordination of women by men.

The question about men

Questions have been raised and answers given as to why in many societies men seem to have conspired to sideline women, in both public and private space. This has been –at times– theorised in terms of men's unexplained fear of women, contempt for the female gender, men's greater physical power over women, determination not to lose historical, socio-cultural and economic advantages over women, habitual socialisation that essentialises femininity and masculinity or a combination of all these reasons. Basically, an unwritten rule seems to have catapulted men to the role of controlling women, speaking and even making decisions for them on matters that affect women in fundamental ways. Feminist research seeks to generate evidence-based knowledge from women's perspectives to explain these assumptions and expose fallacies where they exist.

What is feminism?

Briefly defined, feminism is the ideology of women's liberation founded on the intrinsic belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex (Humm, 1995: 94). Under this framework are various strands of feminisms that offer different analyses of the causes/agents of female oppression. Hence, feminism is founded on a moral imperative to understand the power that governs oppression of women and seeks to learn how such power could be challenged and negotiated for women's liberation and empowerment in order to create equitable societies. Feminism is informed by serious reflections on the histories and nature of sexual differences and the mechanisms by which such differences are enmeshed in and created out of male power relations that are entrenched in patriarchal ideology. There is not a single comprehensive definition of feminism as any definition tends to be shaped by specific ideology, training, race and histories. On the one hand, for instance, Marxist and socialist feminists underscore the multiple forms of interactions within feminisms of class with those of gender, arguing that social distinctions between women and men in various contexts must be the locus of feminist analyses (Mitchell and Oakley, 1976; Weiner, 1994). On the other hand, black feminists argue that

feminist analyses have an obligation to address the multiplicity of social systems of oppressions in order to unlock the interactions of race and gender. Such dynamics in the field of feminist scholarship and research has resulted in several strands of feminisms that are worth exploring in order to understand the complexity of the question of woman within feminist research.

Who is a feminist?

Like feminism, there is not a single definition of the feminist simply because feminists have different affinities that drive their agenda in challenging women's oppression. There are those that focus on class and race (Marxist socialists), patriarchy and sexuality (radical), and individual freedoms and equal opportunity for women (liberal). A feminist therefore, is basically a person who is committed to the theorisation and the ideological mission of challenging men's subordination of women and consequently demanding political, social and economic transformation in favour of women's empowerment.

What is feminist research?

One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences and uses these experiences as significant indicators of the 'realities' against which hypotheses explain women's lives in a manner that may be tested and yield existential and phenomenological significance (Harding, 1987:7). Feminist research is basically founded on the appreciation of the need for women to be the first to reveal what women's experiences are in their local contexts. Hence, according to Harding (1987), women should be part and parcel of the design and administration of the institutions where social knowledge is produced and disseminated for purposes of social justice. Feminist research also recognises that there is neither *universal womanhood/femininity* nor *universal manhood/masculinity*, as these are constructed variously based on women's and men's varied contexts, experiences, desires, and interests that are influenced by class, race, caste, ethnicity, age and culture which are subject to change.

Why conduct feminist research?

There is unequivocal understanding that women –as a group – suffer oppression by men and that such oppression is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed and challenged within the framework of the United Nations perspective on human rights. This perspective provides the basis and justification of feminist research which seeks to reveal experientially, the nature of women's subordination as manifested in deprivation, oppression, exploitation and pain that women sustain as a group. Feminists seek to know and understand better the essence of this subordination for the sake of bringing about change and improvement in the situations of women.

3. Feminism as a Different Way of Seeing 'the Problem'

Feminist research considers the diversity of womanhood (multiplicity of femininities) through exploration of diverse views of women's experiences that are culturally specific and sometimes unique to different groups of women. Feminist research usually pursues questions such as:

- what entails women's oppression in a particular context?
- what are the sources of this oppression?
- what should be done to eradicate the oppression and bring about empowering change for women?

In addition, some feminists focus on the problem of exclusion of women whereby women have been 'left out' of, for example, positions of family/community/divine/state power, oral/documented history, or are excluded from everyday conversations. Other feminists are committed to exposing the deliberate/ unconscious effort by men to lock women out of mainstream power and decision-making processes. Further, some feminist researchers investigate causes of the inability of women to question their own oppressed situations and to demand their place in social, economic and political space.

What do feminist researchers focus on?

Doing feminist research requires an understanding of women's own experiences as women in a culture which is basically '**patriarchal**'. Personal experience of the unease about a difference between the way the world functions *vis-à-vis* the way women might prefer it to function for them in the privacy of their homes, at their workplaces and in the community. Notably, there are '**discrepancies**' between what '**is**' the situation and a sense of what women feel '**ought**' to be the case— and it is on this sense of discrepancy that feminist researchers position their research focus.

Expectations from feminist research

Feminist research is charged with exposing various social and gender stereotypes that demean, humiliate and sideline women -consequently demanding that men change their ways to support the human rights of women as equal human beings. Using evidence-based research, feminists endeavour to design their work in such ways that allow the research process and its outcomes to challenge resistance to women's inclusion in the world of politics, economics and culture through a process of critical awareness raising, education and conscientisation (see Freire. 1971 & 73). Further, feminist research is meant to inform on the values and strengths embedded in the concerted effort to support the course of women in dismantling their subordination while concurrently reforming social institutions to facilitate women's empowered inclusion. Feminist research seeks to examine—critically- all existing knowledge with a view to constructing new knowledge that brings on board women's understandings and interests. Thus,

feminist research is instrumental to enhancing women's education, increase women's economic power, as well as strengthening women's access to, control and ownership of property and various resources. In order to succeed in this mission, feminist research necessarily links to the different 'feminisms' that guide different interests in research issues and engage in differing techniques of generating data from different theoretical positions that complement each other to interpret the everyday lives of women. Consequently, feminist research is expected to yield new conclusions about women's place in a society where men have enjoyed historical advantages over women. Feminist research elicits high hopes of new recommendations and new actions to usher in support for women's empowerment on the same footing with that of men.

In order to make the presumed new outcomes relevant, there is a need to capture the voices of women as they speak about their lives, in their own linguistic idiom (not through men's words), about their experiences of being women, being frustrated, humiliated, subordinated and put down, of being invisible, of violence and of being violated, of losing and regaining self regard; and of being trapped and of gaining or regaining their freedom.

The role of voice in feminist research

Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1997) demonstrate the centrality of women in revealing the reality of womanhood. They underscore the need to –methodologically- pay attention to women's and girls' voices as well as their silences (what they say by their silences). These would include **voices** of women rising above difficult times; of their histories and cultural heritage, of childhoods, teenage years, and young adulthood; of being wives and mothers, single women, getting education and jobs, or being in the paid and unpaid workforces. Further, feminists seek the **voices** of women about institutions they find themselves in (or excluded from, or incarcerated in) – voices of life in schools, hospitals, churches, work organisations, parliaments, bureaucracies, unions, marriages, prisons and so on. In addition are the **voices** of women's experiences with men, of being of different classes, castes, ethnicities and racial backgrounds; of their mystified bodies and of their related reflections; voices of their illnesses and addictions, of menstruation and of menopause and related stigma; of giving birth, growing older, having different abilities and disabilities, of chronic and acute illness, and of dying – all in a manner that is outside the male-centric experience of being or the masculine epistemology. In this context, women's voice becomes a central tool in feminist methodology whereby the use of language forms part of the analysis. Contextually, Zulu Sofola (1998) points out the problematics that the language -specifically the English language - presents to non-English mainly because of its gendered tendency to present the feminine as an appendage of the masculine. Sofola (1998: 53) demonstrates the fundamental difference between this colonial language that is gendered and the various African languages that define the feminine gender independently of the masculine. Embedded in women's voices is woman's reality of her linguistic world as she experiences its effects on her social life. According to Harding (1987), feminist research does not derive its value just in the questions that are asked women – but more significantly, in **those that are not asked** – and which are as determinative of the total picture as any answers that can be

discovered about women. Harding (1987: 7) adds that, women should be allowed to reveal –for the first time- what their experiences are in their own terms and in their own voices –in the best way they know how.

4. Feminist Methods and Methodology

Feminist researchers have preference for techniques that are women-centred, friendly to the female agenda and which they argue, are designed to yield the best results for women. For instance, traditional standard surveys of collecting numerical information and performing statistical computations can be made friendly to the feminist mission if they are designed to establish female subordination patterns and the extent to which these impact on women's positions *vis-à-vis* those of men. Methodologically, techniques that allow the analyses of documentary material such as policy papers, research reports and theories that reveal pertinent issues that are key to women's experiences form part of the range of methods in feminist research. Above all the feminist methodology entails approaches that support the direct hearing and listening to life stories of women through recorded in-depth interviews and ethnographies. The life history has remained a favourite technique in feminist research methodology particularly in Third World countries of Africa and Asia as well as for minority women in Developed Worlds. According to Humm (1995), Life histories entail the analyses of women's lives based on oral narratives, letters, diaries, and autobiographies, thus producing feminist-based knowledge. By avoiding universalism and focusing on individual stories, life histories become potentially potent in dealing with the specifics of women's oppression in multifarious contexts that surveys can hardly capture (see Humm, 1995).

Importance of context

Exploring the settings and the reasons why women have continued to experience what they experience - as women in relation to men – helps to validate women's claims about their worlds. Such settings and reasons constitute the contexts of women's lives that entail history, political economy and material realities all of which need critical examination singly and jointly. In examining these contexts, it is imperative to ask guiding questions such as, **who** benefits from available resources at the family, community and state level; **how** come **unhelpful but dominant stereotypes** are held in place even when they lack scientific basis (e.g. the idea that in order to remain relevant, 'women must be youthful, sexy and beautiful', or the unscientific idea that 'fathers always know best' or 'boys will be boys'. Further, in order to understand context, feminist researchers are bound to raise the question **how** it is that women find themselves colluding with ideas that hurt them? Or **what** are women up against when they try and resist or act differently from stereotypes that hurt them? Further, **what** are women's successes and triumphs and **what are** the necessary conditions for these to thrive?

Ethical considerations in feminist research

Being qualitative in nature, feminist research is governed by ethical considerations that are employed in qualitative research. These include tenets of subject-centredness, mutual respect, sensitivity, empathy, reflexivity and flexibility among others. Hence, the feminist researcher consciously reflects on the methodology and always asks questions aimed at protecting women such as:

- Does this technique disempower women?
- Will women be harmed by this approach - whether individually or as a gendered group?
- Will women's knowledge and understanding be most enhanced by this technique?

Can men do feminist research?

As a historically woman-centred and woman-driven theoretical and practical approach to issues of women's subordination, the question of whether men can indeed conduct feminist research is justified and pertinent. If we are to base our arguments on the premise that a feminist is a woman who knows that she and other women are oppressed **on grounds of gender from personal experience**, then a man will not be in a position to either be a feminist or do feminist research. However, if we accept that a man can come to **realise** that women are oppressed on **grounds of gender from his own experience** whereby he and other men collectively benefit from the oppression of women and if the man takes a position against this, then men can be pro-feminist, and can engage in pro-feminist research. Nevertheless, while it may not be prudent for men to directly research women's experiences directly, it seems reasonable for pro-feminist men to research men's own dissatisfaction with elements of patriarchy as well as the resultant oppression of women. Pro-feminist men are capable of turning their attention to how structures of subordination of women by men function and to find relevance in feminist methodological approaches in researching their experiences and those of other men in order to transform the subordinating practices. According to Harding (1987: 11) it would be foolhardy to assume that men were incapable of making important contributions to feminist research and scholarship, considering that men are important actors in women's subordination and oppression. Harding (1987) further observes, and rightly so, that there are clearly important contributions to the history of feminist thought that have been made by men such as John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels -and others - all of whom belonged to white male privileged social classes. Their writings regarding women's subordination are as insightful and even as controversial as are others by feminist scholars.

5. Why Gender Research

Feminist research is motivated by outcomes and impacts of power relations between women and men that disempower women. Further, the welcoming of men into feminist research underscores the importance of having women and men working together to dismantle inequitable relations between the two sexes, not just in the social context of family, workplace,

politics and so on but also in the world of research, scholarship, education, and the generation of comprehensive knowledge. Understanding the relationship between the feminine and masculine (i.e. gender construct and gender relations) is key to the understanding of the essence of **human rights** in the context of **social equality** not only within localized contexts but also from a global perspective. Contemporary feminist researchers insist on the explicit distinction of the concept of 'sex' and its related concept of 'gender' both of which are human traits and which, if fully understood would help expose the fallacy of treating the two concepts as synonymous. This is not in any way contradicting the fact that biological sex has always provided the raw material with which societies construct gender and gender relations through the process of *gendering*. On the contrary, as Simone De Beauvoir (1972) ably argued, human beings are born female or male (their biological sex) but society constructs them exclusively socially and culturally as women and men respectively whereby male is often positioned as the 'positive norm' –the first sex- with the woman as the 'negative' other sex, or the 'second sex'. Based on this theorisation, feminist researchers embrace gender as both a theoretical underpinning as well as a practical category of analysis that requires analytical tools that are responsive to the gender equality agenda. Research theorists and scholars have demonstrated, quite convincingly, that many of the renowned male-based socio-psychological theories, especially in the area of learning, have been founded on research by men who were grossly gender blind. Their perspectives were explicitly shaped by their understandings of boys and men within their respective social classes. Here we find examples of theorists such as Freud and Kohlberg. After them we find a different category of feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan's (1982) study on how girls developed moral autonomy presented a direct challenge to Kohlberg's theory of moral development which was based on a study of white middle class male children and eventually applied, unreflectively to 'all children', everywhere. Notably, the counter-findings from Gilligan's research were based on a sample of white middle class females which showed that the girls' socialization which was group-oriented and founded on mutual responsibility, caring and relationships formed the basis of their development of a communal sense of morality. Kohlberg's findings on the sample of boys revealed more individualistic attainments in their development of moral autonomy as is prescribed by proponents of masculine rationalistic theories. All this begs the question whether a similar study in different contexts within African settings would yield comparable results.

Suffice it to say that studies of women's conditions require a gender perspective to guide the interrogation of gender power relations that is potentially detrimental to women's wellbeing. In the area of women's health for instance, a review of the Public Health Service (1985) task force in the United States found that the exclusion of women from clinical research was detrimental to women's health and indeed, affected their response to the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, menopause, physique and other health parameters. Research has also revealed instances whereby woman have been unable to access much needed health services because cultural norms in their communities prevented them from travelling alone –without male escort- to health clinics. In other instances, married women are known to have contracted HIV from their spouses because societal standards encourage the husband's promiscuity as a sign of virility

while simultaneously preventing the wives from insisting on safe sex through use of condoms.

Does gender research make a difference in feminist perspectives?

The value of gender research lies in the potential to increase the shift of emphasis in feminist scholarship away from women towards gender relations (men and women). After years of either ignoring feminist work or assuming it is only for women, many theorists are increasingly turning to feminist scholarship in order to examine the positive impact that the gender perspective makes to **what we know already, how we know it** and also in allowing issues about the social **construction of masculinities** as well as **femininities** to be addressed in a relational manner. Gender research is therefore a necessary component of contemporary feminist research –creating the idea of feminist gender research that has the potential for enhancing gender equality and eradicating women’s subordination founded on sound research-based knowledge.

Feminist gender research requires conceptual and practical skills for it to be effective and bear meaningful results. Hence, getting the definitions sorted out and ensuring that ‘gender’ is never equated with ‘sex’ or with ‘women’ is a primary imperative. Further, the understanding that the category ‘women’ (or that of ‘men’) does not represent a single homogeneous group, but rather a multiplicity of women who are differentiated by class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality, religion and so on helps to clarify the fact that gender relations are multifariously constructed and are context-based. The appreciation of the nature of gender roles as socially constructed for purposes of isolating and understanding the women’s world from that of their male counterparts is basic in any feminist gender research. Of equal importance is the fact that social role differences between women and men are fundamentally different from –though closely linked to – sexual role differentiation. These and related conceptual understandings of gender enhance the researchers readiness to conduct systematic gathering and examination of information on gender differences and social relations in order to identify, understand and redress inequities based on gender, at each stage of the research process and at the various phases of a woman’s life cycle.

Pre-requisites for gender feminist research

Gender research needs to be feminist in orientation while at the same time ensuring that men and boys do not end up marginalised and subordinated by this process and its outcomes. It needs to always place gender issues in the foreground not only with regard to the subjects but also amongst the research team members. For example, researchers should always remember that they are gendered within and outside the research sites and that they belong to gendered histories. The feminist gender research requires participatory approaches that empower both women and men, preferably using a bottom-up approach that entails ‘doing research with the people’. Like feminist research, the feminist gender research ought to allow space for the expression of emotion that comes with self-reflexivity of the research subjects (women and men). In recent times, inter-disciplinary approaches which embrace voice-based research on topics and methods drawn from various academic fields with an emphasis on the multiple

dimensions of social problems has become popular among feminist researchers. Embedded in this kind of research is the **analysis of power hierarchies** which entail taking action to address power inequalities between researcher and research participants as well as among the research participants themselves. In this context therefore, feminist gender research takes on political action –that is, beyond research for the sake of increasing knowledge and information *per se*, to envisioning feminist research as a form of political advocacy that aims to:

1. generate a concrete impact on policy and programme formulation
2. create social change – including within social institutions, structures, and cultures

6. Choosing Data Sources and Methods

There are two readily available sources of data for feminist gender research namely, **documents** (for secondary research) and **subjects/participants** (for primary research). For secondary research, documentary/desk or literature review can be a useful way of gathering information about what is being conveyed in policies, initiatives, projects, research and evaluation reports of best practices, and other relevant documents that already exist. With regard to documents, especially policies, it is important to ask the following questions:

- *How do these policies and/or laws affect men and women differently?*
- *Do women and men receive different levels of benefits from the policies being reviewed?*
- *Is the language used gender-sensitive or does it reinforce gender roles based on stereotypes and myths?*
- *Have women (and men) been involved in drafting these documents?*
- *Do I have access to a full range of documents on this issue, for instance, reports produced by women's organizations, documents specifically focusing on women and gender aspects of social relations?*

For primary research, data from research participants typically make use of a variety of methods that help to reveal aspects of the same issues, through a process of triangulation of methods and data sources as well as researchers. This requires knowledge, understanding and skill of how to administer a wide range of research methods that include both the quantitative and qualitative as well as the more modern and innovative interactive community participatory methods and the art-based/photo voice methods. The following is a list of examples –though not exclusive- of methods that have great potential in generating primary data in feminist gender research

1. Survey questionnaire
2. Open-ended interviews
3. Oral histories/ life histories
4. Focus group discussions
5. Participant and non-participant observations
6. Other subject friendly methods such as photography, drawing, memory work, journal/

diary keeping among others

7. Analysing Data

When analysing data from feminist gender research, the researcher needs to remain guided by questions of not only **what is the case** but also **why this is the case**, and **how the case can be changed** to enhance women's equality and empowerment. For instance, the research should ask:

- **Where** are the women's views? Where are the men's views?
- **What** are the women saying? What are the men saying?
- **What** are the women actually doing? What are the men doing?
- **Who** benefits from the women's and men's work?
- **How** are women and men benefiting?
- **Who** makes decisions on benefits accrued from community/family activities?
- **What** gender differences can be observed through the research?
- **How** does the research issue differently affect women and men?
- **Who** is most affected by restrictions?
- **What** role do gender relations play in various contexts?
- **What** power relations have been observed through the process of conducting the research?
 - What about between the researcher and participants?
 - What about amongst the participants themselves?

Making recommendations from feminist research

While making recommendations for policy and practice, the researcher needs to keep in focus the roles of women *vis-à-vis* those of the men as well as the ensuing impacts on women's lives. Hence, some of the pertinent questions to ask at this stage would include

- **How** can the findings be translated into action and used to develop more gender responsive programmes and policies?
- **What** specific actions need to be taken to bring about positive change in social gender relations?
- **Who** should be charged with the actions being recommended?
- **What** would be needed to implement the recommendations and institute the envisaged changes?
- **How** would women and men be involved in the change process to ensure ownership in gender equitable interventions?
- **What** resources (human and otherwise) will be needed to facilitate the change process?
- **How** long would it require bringing about the required changes for women and men?

Communicating results and recommendations

The first point of dissemination of feminist gender research is at the research community level. Here the research findings and tentative recommendations should be presented in a face-to-face discussion for validation and revisions where necessary, with the aim of counterchecking and enhancing community ownership of process and outputs. This consequently helps to increase qualitative confidence in the researchers as they prepare for ensuing actions of further disseminating of the research results to wider and relatively more removed audiences, including policy makers. It is noteworthy that effective participatory communication of research findings can be central to the creation of political will, institutional commitment and further community participation in implementing subsequent related actions based on the recognisable research findings and recommendations. This approach is also critical in advocating for, and persuading like-minded partners to support actions that are gender sensitive, responsive, community-centred and evidence-based.

8. Conclusions

Three main conclusions are derived from this article. Firstly, while records have presented the origins of feminist thought as un-African, its mission and vision of exposing and challenging women's subordination is in tandem with contemporary thinking of the human rights perspective as expounded by the various United Nations conventions and declaration on human and women's rights and to which many of the African countries are signatory. Secondly, women and men who proclaim their support and commitment to eradicating gender inequality that is founded on men's advantages over, and discrimination of women, can - and ought to - be engaged in feminist research for purposes of enriching the emergent knowledge base of girls' and women's relational lives. Thirdly, the gender dimensions in feminist research offer the critical point of departure from a traditional women's-only focus -and the historically male-based knowledge- to a more interactive process of addressing the social relations based on the culturally constructed gender boundaries that are directed by patriarchal tendencies of keeping the women behind the men, intellectually, socially, economically, politically and otherwise.

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