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The Challenges of Feminism: Gender, Ethics and Responsible Academic Freedom in African Universities

Amina Mama*

Abstract

Feminist theory and ethics have enormous potentials to transform and energize the discourse on academic freedom and social responsibility. As a theory of knowledge and an intellectual practice, feminism deconstructs the epistemological foundations of patriarchy and contributes to the emancipation of women as subjects and studies on and about women as critical intellectual engagements. Despite this potential, the discourse on academic freedom and intellectual responsibility in African universities has rarely yielded ground for feminist ethics, and feminist intellectuals within the universities have had to struggle for space. This article discusses these struggles to insert feminism as part of the intellectual discourse on academic freedom within Africa’s scholarly community between 1990 – the year of the Academic Freedom Conference in Kampala – and 2010. The institutional and intellectual challenges that have been encountered by feminist-inspired academics are highlighted. Finally, the author discusses the imperatives to move the discourse on gender in African scholarly communities beyond the normative policy rhetoric to tackling the gendered configuration of academic institutions.

Résumé

La théorie et l’éthique féministes ont un potentiel énorme pour transformer et animer le débat sur les libertés académiques et la responsabilité sociale. En tant que théorie de la connaissance et pratique intellectuelle, le féminisme déconstruit les fondations épistémologiques de la patriarodie et contribue...
au discours de l’émancipation de la femme tout en étudiant son engagement intellectuel critique. En dépit de cette potentialité, le débat sur les libertés académiques et la responsabilité intellectuelle dans les universités africaines a à peine généré les fondements de l’éthique féministe, et les intellectuels féministes ont dû batailler dur pour trouver leur espace. Cet article discute de ces luttes pour la cause de l’insertion du féminisme dans le discours intellectuel sur les libertés académiques au sein de la communauté intellectuelle africaine entre 1990 – année de la Conférence académique sur les libertés académiques tenue à Kampala – et 2010. L’article met donc en relief les défis que les intellectuels féministes ont eu à confronter. In fine, l’article discute des impératifs dictées par la nécessité de placer le débat sur le genre en milieu académique africain au-delà de la rhétorique politique normative pour la matérialisation d’une configuration basée sur le genre dans les institutions académiques.

Introduction

Feminism challenges us at very many levels; and as an intellectual politics, it also faces many challenges. It is a call to freedom, in an era where there is generally ‘less freedom in the air’ than there seemed to be twenty years ago. Feminism, put simply, refers to the ongoing struggle to free women from centuries of oppression, exploitation and marginalization in all the vast majority of known human societies. It is a call to end patriarchy and to expose, deconstruct and eradicate all the myriad personal, social, economic and political practices, habits and assumptions that sustain gender inequality and injustice around the world. Feminism seeks nothing less than the transformation of our institutions, including our knowledge institutions. The widespread manifestations of feminism in and beyond the global academy has had resonance in the African social science community too, touching the personal, professional and political lives of many, especially those accepting the importance of gender equity to democracy and freedom. Others still choose to ignore gender, or insist on its irrelevance in their scholarly work, despite the limitations this imposes on their basic understanding of almost all social, political and economic phenomena. As a trans-disciplinary intellectual paradigm, feminism was pushed into the consciousness of Africa’s mainstream scholarly community 20 years ago, well into the UN Decade for Women, Peace and Development. Needless to say, both feminist movements and gender equity policy discourses were already quite widespread in the region. CODESRIA’S first public engagement with gender was the 1991 workshop on ‘Gender Analysis and African Social Science’, held in Dakar, just a year after the interventions of several then-young feminist scholars at the Kampala Conference on ‘Academic Freedom’ (Imam and Mama 1995).
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