3

Establishing Gender Studies Programmes in South Africa: The Role of Gender Activism

Amanda Gouws

Introduction

This chapter provides a critical engagement with the idea of gender activism and its role in the establishment of Gender and Women's Studies in South Africa. It also looks at how the institutionalization of gender has changed the nature of activism in the absence of a strong women's movement post-1994.

The aim of gender activism and its link with Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) has always been to create a better society for women and to enhance democracy. We need to ask ourselves to what extent we have succeeded in this mission when greater corporatization of universities undermines transformation initiatives and agendas.

The Uncomfortable Relationship Between Activism and the Academy

The relationship between women who are political activists and women in the academy (some of whom were also activists) has been an uncomfortable one, but from the perspective of struggle, a mutually beneficial one. Both sides played an important role in putting gender on the agenda during the transition to democracy in South Africa and keeping it there. The activists were responsible for the mobilization of thousands of women, especially when the Women's National Coalition (WNC) was formed.[1] The academics articulated the terms in which gender had to be taken up in government policy documents, legislation and demanded the inclusion of women in parliament.

Tensions between the two groups stemmed from (1) issues of representation and racism, (2) the perceived schism between academics and activists, (3) issues of experience.

The representation debate and racism

A large amount of literature has been generated by the representation debate[2] that has at its core the problem of some white women academics who, when representing black women or doing research on them, silenced their voices and disempowered them. This led to arguments about who can do research on whom and a period of unproductive accusations on both sides. These conversations also began to address the under representation of black women in the academy – a consequence of larger discriminatory forces in South Africa at the time, such as the lack of access to education or inferior education for black South Africans and discriminatory educational policies.

White women academics who were sensitive toward the issue of representation were often lumped together with women academics guilty of representing the "other" in an unthinking and insensitive way, aggravating the tension between academics and activists.

Due to the privileged position of white women, many had patronising attitudes toward black women in the women's movement, the majority of whom had lower levels of education. In meetings on a grassroots level many black women did not speak English, often requiring the presence of a translator. These patronising attitudes of white women can be viewed as a consequence of the internalization of racism in the South African context. It was easy for white women to deny their own racism or to blame it on structural forces (Hassim and Walker 1993: 527-528). This often led to angry outbursts by black activists.

Schism between grassroots women and academics

Very often, especially during women's conferences in the 1990s, it became apparent that grassroots women perceived academic women as more privileged and disconnected from the lives of women who do not work in the academy. Academic women were perceived as talking on an abstract level without the necessary experience to "understand" the lives of grassroots women. Issues of experience became central to the debate about representation.

Experience

Some black activists insisted that their experience of oppression could not be understood by whites. Experience, therefore, became the platform from which to engage in activism. This absolutist stance on experience foreclosed debate about the engagement of black and white women in each others' experience and prevented the emergence of a debate on class (see Funani 1992 and 1993). In this regard a switch took place from gender to race as the category of analysis. Academics argued that in order to understand experience it has to be mediated through such concepts and theorized accordingly (See Gouws 1996).

Universities as Sites of Struggle

The universities, however, became important sites of struggle as the gender struggle was taken into the academy. Gender and Women's Studies were viewed as the academic arm of the women's movement. Already in 1993, Hassim and Walker suggested a feminist agenda for academic women. They argued that feminism has to encompass a political project to challenge the subordination of women and feminist research had to be part of the process of empowering women. As they (1993:531) argued the relationship between feminist academic work and the women's movement is a complex one and one that requires academics to consider carefully activists' demands for greater accountability. It could never be a one to one relationship – it could not only represent the ideas of the women's movement; it needed to include critique as well. As they put it: (ibid.) "This requires a context of relative autonomy from immediate political imperatives, even though the work may be informed by broader political commitments".

They also argued that one of the important achievements of feminist academics has been to give credence to Women and Gender Studies programmes in the university and they warn that feminist academics should be careful that these programmes do not become a reason for university administration to ignore gender discrimination in the universities. They urged that the women's movement should acknowledge the legitimacy and the limits of academic work and feminist academics should construct a *political project* to further the gender struggle in society (Hassim and Walker 1993:533).

The universities as a site of struggle required that feminist academics destabilize relationships of unequal power and inequality in the academy but maintain the crucial link between activism and the academy.

After the 1994 election with the ANC's commitment to a one third gender quota some of the most competent female activists went into parliament and became active politicians. This depleted the women's movement of some of their most vocal and articulate activists. While this opened some spaces of access for research on women in government for academics, it is far from clear to what extent women in government support the feminist project in the academy. Transformation in higher education requires that academics and activists scrutinize the transformation agenda for its impact on the feminist project.

In the West, the institutionalization of Women's Studies grew out of second wave feminism and the close link between the women's movement and feminist academics.[3] In South Africa, feminist academic work and activism developed separately and had an uncomfortable relationship, as discussed above, but with the advent of women's conferences in the early 1990s, a discourse developed between them that was taken into the academy with the institutionalization of Gender and Women's Studies.

Institutionalization of Gender and Women's Studies in Higher Education

Of the total number of students at higher education institutions in South Africa, 53 percent are women (Council of Higher Education Annual Report 2000/2001). This percentage is much higher than other countries in Africa.[4] Still, fewer women study on a post-graduate level than men.

At many of the higher education institutions, the institutionalization of Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) is a result of tireless struggle by women who persisted this is a legitimate field of study and a necessity in higher education. Not only did the gender-blind teachings of tertiary institutions come under scrutiny, but the door was opened to a debate among South African women scholars about what the content of gender courses/programmes should be. Even whether it should be called Women's Studies or Gender Studies resulted in a protracted discourse[5].

Gender and Women's Studies in the African context

The introduction of Gender and Women's Studies in South Africa has been contested for various reasons including: the challenge that it posed to the existing curriculum, perceived competition for resources in the institutions, and debate about what the content of women's studies or gender studies courses should be. The idea of Women's Studies as taught in the West has been viewed with suspicion because of its Western origins and its neglect of the particularities of other geographical contexts, like Africa.

Women's Studies is a more recent phenomenon in Africa – mainly since the 1980s. Mama's 1996 review shows that Women's studies in Africa is not necessarily linked to the broader women's movement but was motivated by other forces such as development initiatives, national and sub-regional political conditions and the crisis in African education. There has also been an urgency about the importance of studying gender as a central concept in social science in Africa (see Salo 2000:5), the neglect of which Salo refers to as social science's "perpetual deafness".

To escape being only the objects of study by Western scholars with Western research concerns Women's/Gender Studies has been institutionalized all over Africa. As Mama (1996:8) notes "[T]he push for institutionalization of women's and gender studies is remarkable in view of the impoverished and declining condition of so many African academic institutions".

Discontent with being the objects of study has led to African feminist critiques of racist and imperialist knowledge production and a rejection of the hegemony of Western scholars and of the unequal power relations between Western and African women scholars. This has also contributed to a premature rejection of important contributions by female scholars of foreign origin (Mama 1996:9).

While feminist scholars have established an independent body of literature and have challenged gender-blind theories and methodologies, the extent to which

this body of knowledge has penetrated or influenced the study of women in Africa is unclear (Mama 1996:4).

South Africa has not been immune to these discontents. Most GWS programmes are under resourced, lacking undergraduate feeder programmes to enable post-graduate programmes to recruit students. The teaching in GWS programmes also runs the risk of becoming undermined in the "gender industry" in South Africa. This industry was created through the need to train people in gender studies for positions in the state and national machinery but also to comply with the agendas of Western aid and development organizations. Manicom (2001:9) in her critical analysis of "gender in governance" has shown that the unquestioning way in which gender is taken up in the governance discourse has led to an uncontextual and formulaic use of gender redress and not the strong theoretical analysis that GWS programmes support.

The main question that needs to be asked here is how GWS is contributing to the political project and a feminist praxis that will liberate women. Some institutions have had more success than others. In this regard the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town's feminist political project can be singled out as making a unique contribution to South Africa and the African continent.

One of the missions of the AGI is the creation of African gender knowledge and this commitment shows very clearly in its course content and research agenda. As was stated very clearly in the workshop proceedings of the "Strengthening of Gender and Women's Studies in African Contexts" (p.6) organized in 2002 by the AGI "GWS needs to place greater emphasis on independent knowledge production; the internationalization of feminism can easily degenerate into another form of colonisation". Activism thus needs to be focused not only on the South African context but also on the broader African context, emphasising the theoretical connection between gender oppression and its eradication.

At other institutions where GWS is not organized in a separate institution problems abound. Because of their interdisciplinary nature, GWS programmes often do not have departmental or disciplinary homes. For teaching purposes expertise is drawn from different departments and those committed to the teaching of gender subjects do so on top of their regular teaching load—what Berlant (1997:148) calls "the bureaucratic violence of work", even though this is no different from many Western countries in the world where gender is taught. Nevertheless, the lack of funding for gender work, the exploitation of the time and expertise of gender scholars (who very often have to contribute to designing gender change policies) can be viewed as a benign institutional neglect through which institutions do not seriously engage with gender knowledge but can still claim to be teaching gender courses. In this regard Shefer (2003:4) for example says the following about the Women and Gender Studies Programme at the University of the Western Cape:

> WGS still functions on a contract basis, with no permanent posts, and still
> struggles, as appears to be the fate of gender studies across the globe, for
> basic infrastructural and material resources. Furthermore, the multiplicity
> of our orientation and the imperative to link the academic programme
> with 'work on the ground' means that the unit is increasingly overloaded
> and faces dilemmas of what to prioritise and where to most strategically
> place one's limited time and energies.

In the African context Tamale and Oloka-Onyango (2000) also argue that gender
or women's studies departments have remained outside the mainstream. As they
state "In essence, gender studies have become ghettoized, confined principally to
women, and making only a limited impact on the overall struggle against gender
bias" (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 2000:11). It is left to women to raise gender
consciousness, earning them the labels of "bitches" in the academy when they
try to disrupt the patriarchal power relations in educational institutions. (ibid:
11).

   We should, however, not underestimate the consciousness of gender inequal-
ity that GWS programmes in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa have raised in
educational institutions, and what they have achieved in terms of establishing it
as a legitimate field of study. It has also been highly effective at changing aca-
demic institutions.

Changing the Institution

The university as a site of struggle linked to the broader women's movement
gives legitimacy to academic feminists' political work (Hassim and Walker
1993:532).

   The institutionalization of GWS has far-reaching consequences for the
institutions into which it is introduced. Institutions cannot be left untouched by
the subversive nature of women's/gender studies because teachers and students
of these programmes are usually change agents who want to transform institutions
so they may eradicate gender inequality and discrimination.[6]

   Tertiary institutions, specifically universities, are no different from any other
institutions where discrimination against women is embedded in the norms of
the institution. In a certain sense, the University is more discriminatory in terms
of gender because of its hierarchical and competitive nature and its status orien-
tation, which is based on merit.

   Gender relations *constitute* institutions so that they reproduce gendered
inequities to varying degrees. Gendered preferences are embedded in the norms,
structures and practices of institutions – they are not irrational choices on the
part of individuals, unintended oversights in policy or deliberate policy outcomes
(Goetz 1997:5). Gender Studies programmes intentionally or unintentionally

challenge the legitimacy of social forms of organization that discriminate against women.

As Goetz argues, gender differentiation in institutions is the outcome of institutionalized patterns of distributing resources and social values, public and private power. Institutional rules protect and promote the interests of those for which they were designed in the first place. Goetz (1997:7) points out that once "the other" (in the case of universities women and people of colour) enter these institutions they find themselves without voice.

Institutions also shape identities and experiences through their dominant discourses. In the case of universities women are forced to internalize male norms and values. As Luke and Gore (1992:202) have argued there are few other places that show patriarchal rule better than a university – in how women are underrepresented in decision making positions on committees and senior academic positions. Melanie Walker's (1997) case study of the Executive Committee of Senate of the University of the Western Cape is a good indication of not only the visible under representation of women but also the invisible discursive practices that silence women.

Changing the Canon

The even greater challenge of Gender and Women's Studies to the academy is to the canon – through the subversive nature of feminist teaching. Questions are posed as to what is a legitimate body of knowledge to be taught and why certain knowledge, when not produced by white men, is not accepted as valid knowledge but marginalized instead. (For example, how is it possible that students can go through a three year philosophy curriculum without having been taught the work of a single woman philosopher?). This challenge goes to the heart of the academy because as Berlant (1997:157) points out, interdisciplinary knowledge, such as gender studies, undoes orthodox training and "defamiliarizes traditional objects of knowledge and norms of evidence and argument".

Berlant (1997:153) expresses the contribution of feminist scholarship as follows:

> The promise was that the counterknowledge and donated activity of feminists would create a new meritocracy, somehow without the violence of hierarchy, fear of difference, and disciplinary defensiveness that frequently serve as a bar to recognition of subaltern talents, knowledge, language, and experience.

Gender and Women's Studies want to deliver on the promise of making learning personal and socially transformative (Berlant 1997:153). Luke and Gore (1992:196) talk of the ongoing opposition to sexist, patriarchal and phallocentric knowledge systems. Feminists make the relations and conditions in which knowledge is produced visible (Luke and Gore 1992:193-194).

Berlant, as well as Luke and Gore write about the Western context, but in the African context feminist scholarship carries an even heavier burden because it has to destabilize Western feminist scholarship and link feminist interventions to the complexity and diversity of African societies, to bring about a new body of knowledge that is both African and transformative of oppressive gender relations on the continent.

Education and Transformation: The Lack of Institutional Support

On all levels education in South Africa has gone through changes aimed at redressing the past inequalities of apartheid education. Schools and tertiary institutions have become racially integrated. Curriculum changes to incorporate outcomes based education in primary and secondary schools have been introduced. Greater diversity in the classroom has brought about needs to develop each individual's intellect regardless of race, gender, age and other forms of difference as suggested in the National Commission on Higher Education's *A Framework for Transformation*. In the face of a context of transformation created by the transition to democracy, feminist academics expected to find an institutional context that would open spaces to strengthen the rather weak institutionalization of Gender and Women's Studies, where the search for gender justice would find an institutional home. Unfortunately, quite the opposite occurred as the teaching of Gender and Women's Studies became seriously undermined.

Ten years after the official end of apartheid in 1994, the higher education landscape in South Africa has changed dramatically. In the face of greater corporatization of universities on a global level, the South African Department of Education has also made policy shifts to accommodate these changes. While some changes have added benefits to the universities others have been detrimental to the contributions that Gender and Women's Studies can make to societal and institutional change.

Greater central control of higher education has increasingly eroded institutional autonomy that has effected the distribution of resources, choices about what to teach and the internal quality control thereover. As Figaji (2003) has recently pointed out

> What has been happening in South Africa over the past four years, as reflected in the series of amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1997, is a clear indication that central control of higher education institutions has increased and that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are being seriously undermined.

The trends in education to position national and regional economies for global success, prompting Figaji's remarks are succinctly summarized by Singh (2001:10):

- The requirement of higher education to demonstrate efficiency, effectiveness and value for money by integrating it in to public finance management accounting systems, external quality assurance systems etc,
- Declining investments of public funds to subsidize student fees,
- The dominance of managerial and entrepreneurial approaches to and within higher education resulting in the fact that higher education institutions are run like income-generating businesses,
- The privatization of higher education services like catering and cleaning,
- The increasing development of labour market responsive curriculum reforms intended to appeal to employers and students as "customers and clients".

Social benefits are thus viewed through the prism of responsiveness to the market.

As Singh (2001:12) argues, what is lost in the process is the facilitation of social justice through enhanced access to higher education, the role of higher education in equalising life chances, irrespective of social origin. Even more worrisome is the lack of the pursuit of knowledge in a variety of fields critical to human development broadly understood and, as she puts it, the possibility for higher education to function as a "critic conscience of society". Market driven initiatives have limited access for women, minority ethnic groups and the rural poor.[7] This clearly shows a disjuncture between efficiency and social transformation imperatives.

But academic autonomy and freedom also pertains to what can and cannot be taught. Andre du Toit (2000:111) points out that, traditionally, the insistence that only the universities themselves could determine the academic content of courses meant that academic freedom required internal accountability in terms of peer review and strict disciplinary criteria. He argues that external accountability to faceless bureaucrats is foreign to academics and truly inhibits academic freedom.

As part of the response to the market the Department of Education required the creation of interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary programmes that could respond to demands in the market (students have to be trained for "a job"). The creation of market-driven programmes challenges the idea of the intrinsic value of education, especially in the humanities and the liberal arts in particular. Yet, at the same time, the idea of programmatization should have benefitted a Gender and Women's Studies curriculum that is interdisciplinary by nature. But because the transformation initiative was replaced by the market initiative embedded in greater globalization, a field of study that could have been the core of the study of social justice becomes marginalized.

Mama (2003) has pointed out that as universities become less accountable to the local public and more accountable to technocratic, market-driven notions of efficiency and financial diversification, the gender equality agenda becomes

increasingly threatened. Where gender mainstreaming has become the logic of the National Machinery for Women the link between feminist academics and women in government becomes attenuated through the machinery. Gender interventions became the preserve of the Gender Equity Unit in the Department of Education, a structure that concerns itself with primary and secondary education.

In this scenario, gender is not integrated into policy documents, and there is no consideration of the multiple overlappping inclusions and exclusions that occur when the intersecting identities of race, class and gender are taken together. Access to higher education has been shaped by racial policies of apartheid and class position more so than by gender. Once women are in the institutions they still face power relations – African women are the most underrepresented group and all women are underrepresented in managerial positions (Hassim and Gouws 1999:98).

Conclusion

The fragmentation of the Women's National Coalition since 1994 and the resulting loss of visible gender activism has delinked GWS from its activist base, leaving recourse to women in government that has not really been supportive of GWS programmes. A new form of activism is needed to link the academy with its broader societal base. Since the imperative for the corporatization of the universities is global, it is surprising that there is no global feminist academic movement to mobilize against the market-driven forces that now encapsulate teaching programmes. Women's organizations have come together on a global level to ensure solidarity among women around issues such as violence against women and sex trafficking and greater marginalization of the poor (see e.g. Stienstra 2000). But there is no comparable global organization for academics working in GWS.

In the African context, the AGI has taken up this challenge by connecting the institute with the wider continent. The GWS list-serve where women across the continent can talk to each other and support each other's work and institutions have made a great difference to the isolation in which women work across the continent. The online journal *Feminist Africa* also contributes to give a voice to research done on the continent. Yet despite these efforts, the AGI has to fight the challenge of limited institutional support and deliberate subversion from management on a continuous basis. The global needs to be connected to the local which means that GSW programmes need to get women in government on board to put pressure on the Department of Education to force higher education institutions to support GWS programmes as forces of transformation.

The irony of the lack of institutional support was exposed when the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC)[8] used GWS in the Western Cape as a model of how regional integration can be achieved. CHEC had, however, no

resources to put forward for the regional initiatives while these would require a considerable use of resources.

For all GWS programmes the link with the community is paramount but GWS needs to make the connection between the local and the global through activism when global imperatives becomes the greatest threat to its survival.

Notes

1   See S. Hassim, "Nationalism Displaced: Citizenship Discourses in the Transition" in *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa.* Ashgate Publishers 2004.

2   See e.g. Funani (1992), Fouche (1993), Funani (1993), Gouws (1993), Hendricks and Lewis (1994), Hassim and Walker (1992) and Gouws (1996)

3   See Carroll (2000:141).

4   See Salo (2000:6).

5   Gender Studies have become the more acceptable title for courses or programmes dealing with women's inequality. Whereas the notion of Women's Studies is rooted in the second wave western feminism in the West with its essentializing tendencies (ignoring the difference between women), gender studies incorporate the differences between women but also between men and women and pay attention to the relationships between men and women. This is important in the African context where African men have also been disempowered by racism and colonial practices.

6   Examples of these changes are the institutionalization of gender equity officers and sexual harassment policies and grievance procedures, see e.g. Salo (2000:8-10).

7   The same arguments apply to tertiary institutions in the rest of Africa, see Zeleza (2003, 2004).

8   This consortium consists of the deputy vice-chancellors of the five higher education institutions in the Western Cape.

References

Berlant, L., 1997, 'Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy' in E. A. Kaplan and G. Levine *The Politics of Research***,** New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Caroll, B., 2000, 'Reflections on "2000 Subversions" Women's Studies and the "21st Century"', *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 13, No.1.

Du Toit, A., 2000, 'From Autonomy to Accountability: Academic Freedom under Threat in South Africa?' *Social Dynamics* Vol. 26, No. 1.

Figaji, B., 2003, 'Over-regulation and Institutional Autonomy can the Two Co-Exist?' Paper delivered at the Conference for Excellence in Tertiary Education, Somerset West 14-15 October.

Fraser, N., 1997, 'Equality, Difference and Democracy: Recent Feminist Debates in the United States' in J. Dean, ed., *Feminism and the New Democracy,* London: Sage.

Funani, L., 1992, 'Nigerian Conference Revisited', *Agenda*, Vol. 15.

Funani, L., 1993 'The Great Divide', *Agenda,* Vol. 17.

'Gender Equity in Education', 1997, Report of the Gender Equity Task Team, Department of Education, South Africa.,

Goetz, A. M., 1997, 'Introduction: Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development' in A M Goetz, ed., *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development,* London: Zed Books.

Gouws, A., 1993, 'The Angry Divide', *Agenda,* Vol. 19.

Gouws, A., 1996, 'Feminist Epistemology and Representation: the Impact of Post-Modernism and Post-Colonialism', *Transformatio*n, Vol. 30.

Hassim, S. and A. Gouws, 1999, 'Gender, Citizenship and Diversity' in M Cross, N. Cloete, E. Beckham, A. Harper, J. Indiresan and C. Musil, eds., *Diversity and Unity – The Role of Higher Education in Building Democracy,* Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

Hassim, S. and C. Walker, 1992, 'Women's Studies and the Women's Movement', *Transformation*, Vol. 18/19.

Hassim, S. and C. Walker, 1993, 'Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in South Africa – Defining a Relationship', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 16, No 5.

Hendricks, C. and D. Lewis, 1994, 'Voices from the Margins', *Agenda,* Vol. 20.

Luke, C. and J. Gore, eds., 1992, *Feminims and Critical Pedagogy***,** New York: Routledge.

Mama, A., 1996, 'Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa During the 1990s' *CODESRIA* Working Paper Series 5/96.

Mama, A., 2003, 'Restore, Reform but do not Transform: The Gender Politics of Higher Education in Africa', *Journal of Higher Education in Africa,* 1:1.

Manicom, L., 2001, 'Questioning the Terms of Local Translations: Globalising "Gender" in – or as – Governance?', *Agenda***,** Vol. 48.

Muller, J., 1997, 'Citizenship and Curriculum' in N. Cloete, J. Muller, M.W. Makgoba and D. Ekong, eds., *Knowledge, Identity and Curriculum Transformation in Africa,* Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

Salo, E., 2000, 'Making our Voices Heard: The Politics of Writing and Publication in African Higher Education' in E. Salo and H. Moffet, eds., *Associate Publications,* AGI.

Shefer, T., 2003, 'Women and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape' *African Gender Institute Newsletter*, Vol. 12.

Singh, M., 2001, 'Reinserting the "Public Good" into Higher Education Transformation' in CHE Kagisano Discussion Series.

Stienstra, D., 2000, 'Making Global Connections Among Women, 1970-99' in R. Cohen and S. M. Rai, eds., *Global Social Movements,* London: Athlone Press.

Tamale, S. and J. Oloka-Onyango, 2000, '"Bitches" at the Academy: Gender and Academic Freedom in Africa' in E. Sall, ed., *Women in Academia,* Dakar: CODESRIA.

Walker, M., 1997, 'Women in the Academy: Ambiguity and Complexity in a South African University', *Gender and Education*, Vol. 9, No 3.

Zeleza, P. T., 2003, 'Academic Freedom in the Neo-Liberal Order: Governments, Globalization, Governance, and Gender', *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Vol 1, No 1.

Zeleza, P. T., 2004, 'Neo-Liberalism and Academic Freedom' in P.T. Zeleza and A. Olukoshi, eds., *African Universities in the Twenty-first Century,* Dakar: CODESRIA.