Editorial: Rethinking Universities I

Amina Mama and Teresa Barnes

Today, as ever, Africa desperately needs its universities. As the pace of technological and social change speeds up, the challenges of knowing ourselves as African people continue to change subtly. Where are the peoples of Africa in world development? What role can our cash-strapped universities play in Africa's fate and future? How do we make sense of global politics and power struggles? Are we at the dawn of a new age of oil-based imperialism, or trapped in a continuing saga of vicious exploitation? What are the implications of the global spread of militarism and religious fundamentalism for Africa, for the women of Africa? Do indigenous knowledges, and indigenous crops and seeds of Africa, hold promise for the future? How can we withstand the consequences of global economic doctrines? What must we do to take advantage of contemporary political democratization processes, or the related opportunities for cultural change? These and many more questions face Africa's corps of comparatively underpaid and definitely overworked – but tenacious – academics, demanding new levels of resilience, tenacity and dedication.

As we struggle to produce new and relevant knowledge in the 21st century, African women continue to display their commitment to education, continuing to regard it as a route to personal and collective liberation and empowerment. We have embraced modern public universities with dedication and enthusiasm, attending them as learners, and serving them as scholars and researchers, teachers and administrators, not to mention the preponderance of women in the various welfare, catering, health, cleaning and other support services that are so crucial for the daily operation of Africa's universities as spaces where the production of knowledge is facilitated.

The next two issues of *Feminist Africa* focus on "Rethinking Universities", because as academics, we want to revisit the sites where we learned, and continue to ply our trade as intellectuals. This is also an opportunity to review some of the themes that first appeared in the very first issue of Feminist Africa back in 2002. With FA8 and FA9, however, we want to revisit the public institu-

tional sites of African knowledge production: as places, as spaces where cultural norms have developed which condition the kinds of questions that are asked and the kinds of answers that are then elicited. We are taking Africa's universities seriously, and rethinking them – going beyond the labels ("crumbling") and behind the static stereotypes ("supporting national development").

Higher education in Africa has always had a gendered element. The antecedents to all the energy women pour into Africa's educational and intellectual development can be seen in the memoirs of the early women educators. Some, like Charlotte Maxeke of South Africa, found it necessary to travel abroad to pursue higher levels of education than were available at home during the colonial era; others established new educational institutions. In the pre-independence years (1940s–1960s), these new institutions included the vocational schools for young ladies set up by Constance Cummings-John on her return to Freetown (where she later became Africa's first woman Mayor), and Mrs Ekpo's educational initiatives for women in Calabar area of Eastern Nigeria, as it was then known. There is also evidence of less conventional educational initiatives, such as Funmilayo Kuti's workshops for illiterate market women, and other non-formal education carried out in a spirit of charitability. Even further back, among Muslim African women, education was carried out by *mallamas*, in the tradition of 19th century scholar and teacher Nana Asma'u, daughter of Usman 'Dan Fodio. In contrast, as the various contributors to FA8 explore in their various ways, modern universities are exhibitions of patriarchy, albeit of the most professedly liberal kind.

The historical material tells us that Africa's colonial-era universities began as extensions of elitist metropolitan institutions. As such, they set out to recruit the brightest and the best of young men from the colonial classes, to train and prepare them to become a new elite destined to serve the colonial state and govern "the natives". African students of the 1950s and 1960s recall gracious conditions of teaching, learning, residence and resource allocation that today's often under-resourced and shortchanged students can only envy. After independence a new mission, that of training indigenes for nation-building and national development took shape, but the institutional form of the university was, by and large, retained.

At no time have women been formally excluded from Africa's post-independence universities, and this is something we can take pride in. However, we are not proud of the fact that, despite this apparent "equality of access", universities have remained highly male-dominated spaces, both numerically

and culturally (Mama, 2003; ACU, 2000). Gender inequalities in Africa's public universities make a mockery of all the proud national and regional political and policy commitments to gender equality and justice, because public universities, as the leading institutions of higher learning, are rightly expected to lead and not lag in the realisation of people's aspirations for full democracy and for social justice. Despite all the declarations and resolutions of the African higher education establishment – Tannanarive (Unesco, 1963), Cape Town 2005 (AAU, 2005), the Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom and the Social Responsibility of Intellectuals (Codesria, 1991), and a great many grand university mission statements – there are persistent institutional inequalities which reflect a lack of commitment to gender issues and taking women seriously in the intellectual sphere.

Beyond the familiar story of quantitative inequalities in African higher education lie the institutional dynamics and processes that produce it, and it is to this much less studied terrain that we direct our attention in 'Rethinking Universities'. We can begin by acknowledging the role of African women in opening up this field of inquiry through a series of concerted interventions over the years, as documented in FA1 (Editorial, 2002; Bennett, 2002; Kasente, 2002). African higher education studies have expanded in response to the renewed interest of both an African scholarly community faced with all the challenges of globalisation and reform, and a resurgence of donor interest. The Council for Social Science Research in Africa has instituted a higher education research programme under Ebrima Sall's leadership, several institutions have established new courses in the field, and the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* is now in its third year and getting over some of its teething problems. In 2007 alone, no less than four books have been published to disseminate the institutional case studies commissioned by the US foundations that constituted themselves into the Partnership on Higher Education in Africa.[1] These will be reviewed from a feminist perspective in FA9.

To keep abreast of the gender politics on this changing higher education landscape, the editorial team at *Feminist Africa* undertook to dedicate two issues to the subject. In 'Rethinking Universities 1' we set out to rethink universities from the inside out. Four of the features report the findings of the *Gender and Institutional Culture* (GICAU) research project, which was conceptualised and carried out by the AGI with the support of the Association of African Universities. This set out to carry out in-depth investigations of the dynamics of gender in specific aspects of the institutional cultures of five leading public

African universities. In the first feature, Teresa Barnes sets the scene with an overview of the field that informed the research case studies. She makes it clear that the transformative ideals of higher education remain relevant and attractive, while the conditions of production of knowledge have remained deeply gendered in ways that have proved difficult to change.

The case studies were carried out by locally based researchers at the Universities of Addis Ababa, Cheikh Anta Diop, Zimbabwe, Ghana and Ibadan, and from amongst these, the reports by Gaidzanwa (Zimbabwe), Tsikata (Ghana) and Odejide (Ibadan) are featured here. The GICAU researchers designed research questions that aimed to illuminate the specific gender dynamics at their chosen institutions, and each therefore addresses different aspects of institutional culture.

Dzodzi Tsikata at the University of Ghana investigated gender dynamics in the academic careers of two generations of faculty on the Legon campus. The university has survived through a turbulent set of political and social upheavals. Tsikata's work shows how these upheavals are interpreted in the lives of individual women academics, some of whom are better able to weather storms because they were anchored in the academy during an earlier age. It is striking that the university itself has maintained its "standards" for staff conditions of service as if the storms raging in the Ghanaian political economy did not exist: at Legon, if you don't publish you may not perish, but you won't be promoted. Thus women faculty who joined the institution in the 1980s and 1990s, faced with academic careers and home/house and family work, are held back by unacknowledged institutional instability in ways that their more unencumbered male colleagues are not.

Abiola Odejide looks deeply inside the gender and class dynamics of student cultures in the residence halls and religious associations at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. She notes that these important aspects of student culture enforce a gendered conformity on women students to a distressing level. These codes reiterate and re-work conservatism and function to constrain women's participation in associational life and knowledge networks. This handicapping extends beyond the campus into post-university employment possibilities. The fact that these forms of association have filled the gap that was left by the collapse of the more secular tutorial system may well have implications for women's academic performance.

Rudo Gaidzanwa's article also peers inside a university, but focuses on the daily lives of academics, rather than students. Her article discusses the changing character of leisure spaces on the University of Zimbabwe campus over the past half-century. Gaidzanwa's article poignantly and cogently brings to the fore issues of how aca-

demic culture survives under excruciating economic circumstances. She shows that one of the conditions of the production of knowledge is the fascinatingly "local" nature of the interactions between academics themselves. How are the "collegial norms" of university life faring under prevailing economic and social conditions? How do academics keep their spirits, bodies and souls together as their institution faces wave after wave of difficult change? Do they, or are they overcome?

One of the ways in which women have sought to improve the quality of academic life has been through challenging sexual harassment, now recognized to be a widespread occurrence within higher education institutions, which has debilitating effects on women. Work in this arena has been ongoing, as indicated by the formation of the Network of Southern African Tertiary Institutions Challenging Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence, in Gabarone in 1996, and the subsequent publications.[2] The feature by Jane Bennett, written with Amanda Gouws and Andrienetta Kritzinger (University of Stellenbosch), Mary Hames (University of the Western Cape), and Chris Tidimane (University of Botswana) is drawn from a research project that set out to investigate the effectiveness of sexual harassment policies between 2004–6, in order to deepen our understanding of the challenges facing such interventions. They discuss the methodological complexities of researching and carrying out policy making in such a complicated arena, to conclude that working on harassment foregrounds all the deep and pervasive contestations around the culture of gender, sexuality and violence that so powerfully affect women's citizenship status in the universities.

In combination, these features offer new information on the pervasive gender culture in universities, and highlight the challenges facing women, those who are actively seeking to bring about change, and those providing support to women facing the extremes of abuse and harassment. They highlight all the daily subaltern dynamics of sexuality and power that so often undermine women in academic institutions, and which continue to pass largely unnoticed and unchallenged. They discuss the kind of thinking and action that institutionalising basic rights and justice requires, providing powerful testimony to the tenacity and persistence of those who "make it" in the academy, not to mention those who struggle and work to bring about change through policy interventions.

The challenges of bringing about change are also revisited in the two Profiles, of activist work in gender and health at the University of Cape Town, and at Makerere University in Uganda. Staff at each institution have pioneered practical initiatives which make an enormous contribution to the well-being of women in their chosen communities. Yet their stories also underline the

importance of institutional and financial support in sustaining even the best initiatives of concerned and action-oriented women staff.

Dr Fay Chung, a Zimbabwean educator, has spent her adult life trying to uproot the inequalities entrenched in our received models of education. This issue's In Conversation features Dr Chung, and shows how, from developing new educational structures in the liberation camps, to trying to re-shape the curricula of independent Zimbabwe, and now to participating in the foundation of a women's university, Dr Chung joins the other activists profiled in FA8 in tenaciously clinging to the ideals of gender equality in education.

As we rethink our universities as sites of knowledge production in the 21st century, we ask: if the universities remain unequal and difficult places for women, what kind of male and female citizens are they now turning out? Has enough been done to decolonise the structures, expectations and horizons of our universities? If the social burdens imposed on women students and faculty, which prevent them from taking their places in traditionally-configured academies are actually increasing, where should our priorities now lie? It is clearly time to rethink and take action, and the contents of this issue of FA8 indicate the depth of the challenges and the extent of the problems – but also the continuing importance of the crucial investigative, profile-raising and support work of transnational feminist networks and organisations.

Thus, this issue also shows how, working from the inside, Africa's academic feminists are conceptualising, investigating and changing the campus cultures around them. As the rest of the world sees African problems and, as always, assumes stereotypical passivity on the part of the continent's people, we salute the tenacity of these activists and urge that the long-term sustainability of their efforts must be positively addressed. There is no other way to bring about the gender transformations of our universities which our diverse, battered but resilient nations require.

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Endnotes

1   The Partnership on Higher Education committed a further US$200 million to African higher education in 2005, but the results of this investment are the subject of debate within the African scholarly community (see www.foundation-partnership.org for details about the partnership).

2   These include the Handbook of Resources to support such work, produced in 2002 (Bennett, 2002) and the book "Killing a Virus with Stones" (reviewed in FA7).

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