



feminist dialogue series

#2

NOVEMBER 2016

Advancing a feminist agenda for change – a view from Nigeria

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What defines feminism for me is the struggle for women's liberation in the context of social transformation. In saying this, I recognise that not all women are identical and that what is typically referred to as the 'identity' of diverse individuals, as well as categories of women, have differing bases in society.

I use inverted commas around 'identity' to refer to the sense in which notions of Who One Is tend to be ascribed, if not prescribed, primarily by external forces – such as static renditions of 'culture', 'tradition' or 'religion'. Dimensions of difference comprising 'identity' have often been politicised at times of political transition, when dominant-men-turned-politicians convert social differences into bases for social division. These lines of social division do not necessarily coincide with one's subjectivity – the internal, subjective sense of who one is, or feelings about where one is said to belong or not to belong. Indeed, one's subjectivity may or may not coincide with dominant renditions of 'identity' but is more likely to vary with shifts in time, place, and context.

What is my own positionality in this whole arena?

Born in Kenya, of Indian descent and resident in Nigeria, my self-identification as an African feminist has often been at odds with dominant definitions of myself as a 'Niger wife' – a foreign woman married to a Nigerian man. (This is, incidentally, an official category of legal identity in Nigeria). At other times, my identity has been ascribed differently, as happened once when I refused the insistent requests from a hawker of trinkets to buy any of his goods. "Why are your people killing Muslims?" he suddenly demanded, as if that followed from anything that preceded our minimal exchange of conversation. Cast as a Hindu fundamentalist intent on eliminating Muslims, I was struck by the irony of the fact of my religious and ethnic minority status in the India of his imagination, given my Catholic upbringing by a mother from Mangalore and father from Goa.



Identity conflicts and the Nigerian context

I am going to speak about Nigeria because I think that identity conflicts are complex processes which require some exposition and Nigeria is itself a complex formation, as evident in its composition of over 200 ethnic groups. The history and geography of its colonisation are such that different regions were colonised differently. Direct rule prevailed in the South, where Christian missionaries were allowed to proselytise and open educational missions. In the North, where Islam had taken hold since at least the 11th century in Borno, indirect rule was grafted onto the Emirate system. Christian missionaries were barred from proselytization in the North, and only allowed to set up schools outside the walled cities of the Emirate seats of power. One of the consequences was a huge regional divide in educational provision and access, especially for girls.

Beyond the colonial era, successive military regimes, interspersed with authoritarian civilian administrations, took it in turns to rule over the people and exploit the resources of the land. With the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta, an economy based on agriculture was turned into one dominated by the extraction of oil. Whilst the land was rich in resources, these benefited only a few in the military, political and business classes, leaving the majority of the people impoverished. The divides of class, region, ethnicity and religion became the fault lines along which contemporary identity conflicts were played out. The social exclusion of the vast majority and their restricted access to resources provided the fertile ground on which the cynical manipulations of 'identity' by 'politicians', as Fela would have it, were played and replayed in the intervals between ruling regimes and the moment of transition from military to civilian rule in May 1999.

A multi-layered struggle

This is not to say that women's struggles have necessarily been riven by the kinds of identity conflicts referred to above. It is more about acknowledging the multiple lines of division that will need to be transcended in feminist struggles against identity politics. Other than gender, these divisions include

class, age, and marital status, in addition to the already identified divisions on the basis of ethnicity, religion and region. These are the various structures of power that shape women's lives in Nigeria and which feminist consciousness would need to grapple with, in terms of theory and politics, in any project of subverting oppression and advancing gender justice.


Religious law

Feminist activist agendas have attempted to disrupt the imposition of unitary or fundamentalist systems of belief, in relation to religion. In the 1990s, the Women and Laws project did so by making critical distinctions between Muslim laws and Islamic doctrine. The laws in principle were distinguished from their implementation in practice, with particular reference to the implications for women. The fact that Muslim laws have varied in form across time and place points to their actual diversity across the multiple spaces and contexts in which Islam has been practised.

With the extension of Sharia from personal laws to include criminal law, in the year 2000, the space for any engagement or contestation with Muslim laws became severely restricted. The new laws represented an effort by the Muslim religious right to reconstruct discourses of heterosexuality, in ways that criminalised behaviour that was previously considered simply immoral. The new crime of zina - sex outside marriage - targeted women disproportionately. All this took place in the context of women's sexuality increasingly becoming the focus of the control of immorality in the midst of deepening social and economic inequalities. Baobab for Women's Human Rights and later, WRAPA, supported the defence of women targeted by the new criminal laws.

Making sense of the more recent phenomenon of Boko Haram requires an understanding of the layering of several inter-related factors. These include the history and politics of the North East of Nigeria, resulting in its political economy as one of the poorest zones of the country, exacerbated further by environmental





degradation. The form that militarisation took under the Jonathan administration, particularly in the North East, along with the state's response to challenges to its authority, combined to give rise to the post-2011 violent manifestation of the insurgency and its gender and sexual politics. Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG), within Nigeria, has emerged as a citizens' movement - not feminist, although women are in the leadership - focused on the return of the Chibok Girls abducted at the end of April 2014.

Sexual and reproductive rights

Shifting the focus to sexual and reproductive rights across the country, abortion across Nigeria is illegal even when a woman or girl has been raped, except when a woman's life is at risk. Reproductive rights are constrained by the generalised resistance to the notion of women's bodily integrity. In the last 15 years, however, tolerance of violence against women has been diminishing in the context of sustained advocacy against such violence, carried out by members of the Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAW) and other groups. The Coalition has pushed for the passage of legislation prohibiting violence against women, which ultimately took the form of the (renamed) Violence Against Persons Act, signed into law in 2015. The import of such a law lies in its demand that the state take responsibility for such violations, and provide redress. The real challenge lies in implementation. More recent legislative upheaval has coalesced around the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill, which was passed in the House and initially rejected in the Senate. A modified version, with the sections on equality in marriage expunged, has since been passed by the Senate. Freedom of sexual choice is non-existent, given the recent passage of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in 2015. Those whose sexuality does not conform to the heterosexual



norm are more likely to experience discrimination, if not overt hostility and violence. The coercive policing of heteronormativity and its boundaries applies not only to the sexually

non-conforming but in differing ways, to heterosexual women too.

Education and the self-determination of women

The decline of the education system in Nigeria, most evident after the imposition of Structural Adjustment by the IMF in the mid-1980s, has resulted in education being more concerned with disciplining the learner with the stamp of authority than with embodying the practice of freedom, as Paulo Freire would have it. Public education today is unlikely to contribute to the formation of self-confident young women who are politically aware and active in society. This is more likely to happen with the informal, extra-curricular activities of groups like Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), providing sexuality education in the South East, and the Adolescents' Health Initiative Project's (AHIP) Family Health education in the North West. Both groups are run by feminists, former members of Women in Nigeria (WIN), established in 1982 at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. WIN's ultimate demise resulted from the clash between feminist and Marxist interests within the organisation, roughly mapped on to power struggles among particular groupings of women and men, respectively, over the direction and focus of the organisation.

A feminist vision of change

At present, the decolonisation of minds by a feminist movement in Nigeria is not on the horizon. To the extent that such decolonisation takes place, it is more likely to be propelled by the activities of feminist groups and individuals with varying agendas, currently dispersed across generations. At least two conditions for promoting a feminist vision that can inspire action for change may be identified, and these do not necessarily have to be located solely within Nigeria. The first is the creation of autonomous spaces for feminist studies i.e. a strengthening and diversification of autonomous bases for the production of knowledge with a feminist agenda. Crucial prerequisites here are material and financial support as well as intellectual and political capacity to run such initiatives. The second condition is the formation of organic links between feminist research and activism. By 'organic', I mean strengthening the links between feminist studies and women's activism such that they are developed in



a mutually constitutive relationship, in which theory is grounded in the concerns of feminist activism and activism is informed by feminist theory.

Some of the questions that are yet to be theorised and understood from a feminist perspective include the implications of multiple lines of division for how diverse categories of women understand their experiences. What might this mean in terms of understanding differences in living conditions as well as experiences among various categories of women and of men? Other questions include developing a deeper understanding of the politics of gender and sexuality, particularly concerning women's bodies, that can take account of contradictions. These include the

co-existence of a politics of respectability (for women) and the sexual commodification and exploitation of women's bodies in diverse spaces. This suggests the need to integrate our understanding of intricately interwoven levels of experience and consciousness, from the emotional and psychological to the economic and political, across levels spanning the local and international. Working across the divides of traditional academic 'disciplines' will be critical here. Perhaps one of the most challenging questions is that of understanding how the 'moralisation of political economy' takes place in the unfolding of diverse religious fundamentalisms, and the implications for feminist strategies of resistance and contestation. ●





About the Author

Charmaine Pereira is a feminist scholar-activist living and working in Abuja, Nigeria. She is a co-founder of Tapestry Consulting, a knowledge platform which engages in work on social policy and on organisational change through research and training on issues of gender and sexuality. Her work addresses the themes of feminist thought and practice; gender, sexual harassment and university education; sexuality and gender politics in the practice of Shari'a; women organising and the state. She is the author of *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System* (James Currey/Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2007) and editor of *Changing Narratives of Sexuality: Contestations, Compliance and Women's Empowerment* (Zed, 2014). In her former role as national co-ordinator of the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria (IWSN), Pereira developed and led action research programmes on the politics of sexual harassment and sexual violence in universities; gender justice and women's citizenship; and women's empowerment.

The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform *Fórum Mulher* and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

The Feminist Dialogue Series proudly counts on the artistic contribution of Ruth Bañón (art header) and the design of Sebastião Montalvão (Lateral Multimedia).

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