

## Gender Research/Teaching Forum

### Institutionalising Gender Equality in African Universities: The Case of Women's and Gender Studies at Makerere University\*

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#### Introduction

The critical description of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Makerere University presented in this short article aims to illustrate what has been achieved and what remains challenging ten years after a commitment was made to institutionalising gender equality. The department was established in 1991 with the intention of providing intellectual leadership for mainstreaming gender within the university and in relation to Uganda's economic, political and socio-cultural development. In what follows, I suggest that the department's experiences in its first decade demonstrate considerable quantitative growth in terms of student numbers, the development of a national and international profile and the expansion of research. This, however, has occurred alongside less and less of a sense of its internal cohesiveness, its accountability to the women's movement and its engagement with issues of gender transformation in the broader society.

While it has been a noble idea to conceptualise the department beyond a conventional academic one, the vision that we have defined for ourselves means that a multiplicity of constituencies and priorities need to be taken care of. First, there is the teaching of several hundred undergraduate students whose numbers continue to swell each year while the staff establishment does not. Secondly, there is the teaching and supervision of post-graduate students. Thirdly, it is now a university requirement that all lecturers have doctorates, a requirement that has seen half of the department's establishment take study leave to keep themselves on the payroll. Also in the background is the fact that staff members are required to undertake research and publish for their career growth. All these are basic university requirements. It does not take much imagination to work out the inevitable tensions generated by trying to reconcile heavy academic requirements with being accountable to the Ugandan women's movement that fought to establish the department in the first place. It should be stressed that the department is often expected to take leadership in pursuing gender equality in the wider community, especially through scrutinising new government policies and programmes and offering skills for gender mainstreaming.

#### Initial Vision

The drive to initiate the department came from a number of women, both within and outside the university, who attended the NGO Forum of the 1985 United Nations World Conference for women which took place in Nairobi. The focus of the conference was on how all women could participate and benefit from national development, and this encouraged many Ugandan women to consider systematically how they could coordinate their knowledge and political interests. At the time, Uganda was in the middle of a series of political crises, having emerged from the infamous rule of Idi Amin. The civil strife associated with the second Obote government fuelled a rebellion that culminated in a military coup in 1986. In this context, the few Ugandan women who attended the world conference and survived the turmoil encountered an array of intellectual ideas and political processes. This involvement significantly influenced the nature of their teaching and research in women's and gender studies.

The UN conference was critical in generating new ideas that contributed to the conceptualisation of an academic department that could take leadership in addressing the gender inequalities affecting the majority of women's lives in a country emerging from a war situation. Importantly, the conference took place shortly before the coup of 1986, a moment when Uganda was poised for major political change. The receptiveness to change applied to

Makerere University as well, and a number of donor agencies expressed interest in supporting the rehabilitation and development of selected programmes following the end of civil unrest. The national context at the time heavily influenced the orientation of the department towards the areas of under-development, lack of rights in access to basic resources, gendered impacts of war and violence and women's low participation rates in different sectors; it was not considered appropriate to develop a purely academic programme concerned primarily with generating innovative knowledge or encouraging new research. It is therefore clear that the department, though based at the university, was initiated by the women's movement and explicitly endorsed the political agenda of transforming women's lives in the face of particular post-conflict circumstances. The expectations of the women's movement were that the department would generate conceptual and analytical frameworks for directly addressing the needs of Ugandan women, many of whom live in rural areas.

### **Teaching Imperatives**

To a large extent, the vision of the department in 1991 is echoed in its present objectives. Currently, its five aims reflect the multiple levels that teaching has to address. The core level is "to train a cadre from various backgrounds who will serve in government, academic, commercial and non-governmental organisations, where they will act as catalysts for change and facilitate the integration of gender in decision-making and policy formulation". However, much has happened to alter the initial conceptualisation of the department as the academic wing of the women's movement. One crucial process was the formation of the Ministry of Women and Development by government. The ministry was mandated to develop national gender policy, to play the role of monitoring other sectors and ensuring that they observe gender-sensitive policies and practices, and to coordinate the activities of women's organisations. This political move crucially shifted the centre of conceptualising and developing women's strategies for development from the academic to the state arena. Consequently, the department's main responsibility became more focused on generating capable personnel to meet the demands of the new ministry and women's organisations.

In recent years, the department has been placed under growing pressure to provide teaching expertise for various sectors. By virtue of its location in the academy, the department's teaching and conceptual frameworks are influenced by its linkages with other departments in the university, the global women's movement and paradigm shifts propelled by new knowledge from related disciplines worldwide. These linkages have led to a shift in focus from "Women in Development" (WID) to "Gender and Development" (GAD), the latter being associated with the mainstreaming of gender. On one level, this means that the department is pursuing the goal of ensuring that various role players in the university and beyond acknowledge the cross-cutting importance of gender theory and advocacy. On another level, however, the department has been increasingly burdened with the responsibility of offering both conceptual and practical resources for implementing gender mainstreaming. Currently, we face numerous calls from government sectors and non-governmental organisations for gender expertise that goes beyond gender analysis to gender programming and gender training.

These demands have put new pressure on the department to revisit the curriculum, and to attract teachers able to deliver required skills. Staff find themselves enormously challenged by extremely heavy teaching loads and varied demands for new competencies. Yet opportunities for staff to acquire the flexible skills demanded of them are limited both by lack of time and by the meagreness of financial support. Overall, therefore, the department is continuously faced with needs and demands to provide research and skills from its multiple stakeholders situated both within and outside the university.

While the department has retained a theoretical commitment to the women's movement, it has not been able to develop curricula and research that directly respond to the needs of the women's movement. In an attempt to support women's agendas and simultaneously meet

demands from the university and other stakeholders, a three-pronged approach has been our main operational mode. This has involved: mainstreaming academic teaching and research; providing skills training for practitioners already working; and offering outreach tailored programmes with NGOs, government departments and other university faculties and departments. The last two strategies have the potential to make a direct impact on advocacy work and policy planning for transforming gender relations. However, the skills training and outreach programmes have become more and more peripheral over the years. They have often been held in the evenings or over weekends, and at times have been dropped altogether. In retrospect, it is evident that the original focus of the department on transforming women's lives has receded. This is not due to lack of will, but because of the tremendous pressure to teach a variety of skills and to develop different forms of research for use in different sectors. While substantial staff development has taken place (from one staff member with a doctorate when the department was launched to five doctorate holders now), this capacity does not match the student numbers we presently have.

Although our student enrolment has steadily increased over the years, a serious criticism at this level is the lack of operational skills among our students. The academic courses we offer for the MA and BA degrees cover a wide spectrum of core and elective courses that are expected to comply with university specifications as vetted by senate. For example, the MA programme currently has six core courses: introduction to gender studies; theoretical perspectives in gender and development; gender and economics of developing countries; research methodology; gender, the state and public policy; and gender and development management. The elective courses attempt to reach out to more specific gender concerns in the Ugandan and African context and include: gender, institutions and social transformation; gender, law and women's rights; gendered identities and social representation; and gender, conflict and displacement. Whether the knowledge acquired will be applied practically to transform unequal power relations between women and men is not part of the university requirement. Herein lies the challenge, especially for the department's founder members, whose expectations go beyond generating knowledge to the realisation of the transformation of unequal power relations in our communities.

An attempt has been made to address this challenge through outreach work developed in conjunction with other universities beyond Africa. Through these partnerships, the department started regional gender training programmes, one offering basic gender training in gender analysis and the other more advanced skills in the form of training of trainers. The idea behind these courses was to create a critical mass of development workers who would work directly with communities to enhance their capacities to meet women's practical needs and to advocate for change where required. Though the courses were popular among the constituencies for which they were developed, they could not be sustained beyond three years because of administrative problems largely related to the lack of a shared vision in the department and the termination of donor support. This commendable teaching project did not therefore achieve its objective of training a critical mass of development workers.

### **Patriarchal Culture**

Another considerable challenge faced by the department concerns its location within a particular organisational culture. While we strive to meet multi-constituency needs, the style of management of the university has remained highly bureaucratic. The strong centralisation of power at the university has generated tremendous competition for authority within departments and faculties. Values and conduct within the department have been influenced by this competitive ethos, and this has often undermined a commitment to social transformation and progressive values. The outreach courses that were central to the department's efforts to support the aims of the women's movement died because of the dominance of a culture that prioritised high-profile achievements and career advancement, and the department has lost many experienced staff who found the aggressive environment intolerable. It is noteworthy that of the five staff members who started the department in

1991, only one is actively operational now. For those who have attempted to contest the prevailing status quo, the price has been high.

The impact of patriarchal values and aggressive inter-personal relations has had a coercive effect. It has put pressure on women faculty members to support powerful males in order to guarantee their career advancement. It has also meant that the freedom the department used to enjoy as an alternative women's space has become more and more constrained by the dictates of the dominant institutional culture. To a large extent, the result now is a culture of silence, with the department experiencing a progressive suffocation of the creativity, freedom and political outspokenness that drove it in the first place.

Because the university is so male-dominated, the department is often pressured to conform to a male culture of competitiveness that it was started partly to transform. There is so much to do and there are so few people to do it that more time is spent on getting things done rather than on allowing space for reflection, strategic planning and monitoring. It is also very difficult to challenge the status quo. Consequently, many have learnt how to use the rules and get ahead. It would be interesting to investigate the levels of job satisfaction of women and men staff members who are in management and those who are not. While this is not known, if informal observation is anything to go by, staff turnover, especially among senior members, appears to be quite high - partly because of a very heavy workload for low pay, but also because of a pervasive feeling of losing voice in relation to what is going on. Clearly, therefore, the department faces the challenge of trying to create an empowering work environment at the same time that it seeks to live up to a commitment made to the women's movement when it came into existence in 1991.

Of course, new staff members have come on board and have infused the department with fresh ideas. Moreover, outside visitors can easily be impressed by what they see. The general impression that the department conveys is of a dynamic and growing space, where students and staff enthusiastically immerse themselves in the activities occurring in a very beautiful and imposing building. But the original zeal for social transformation has been significantly watered down. For the long-term survival of the department and its real impact on the lives of people in Uganda, it seems imperative to share the deeper experiences and lessons.

### **Achievements of the Department**

While institutional and other constraints continue to affect the work of the department, it has made considerable progress. Our expansion since 1991, both in terms of student numbers and infrastructure, has been one of our foremost achievements. The department started with 15 Masters students in 1991, with 90 now having graduated. Over three years, the department has also expanded to include more than 1000 undergraduates who combine women's and gender studies courses with courses taken in other departments. Initially, the Department of Women's and Gender Studies was housed in one room, but we now have a modern block with lecture rooms, a library, several offices and a conference hall. Clearly, substantive achievement has also been made in increasing expertise in theoretical understanding of gender and gender analysis.

The department has also achieved many quantitative gains in doing gender-focused research as part of the MA academic requirements. The staff research profile has been enhanced since an increasing number of staff members are working in multi-disciplinary research teams with other faculties, outside the university and with different categories of agencies. Almost all sectors have been covered in these studies. The change of focus from "Women in Development" (WID) to "Gender and Development" (GAD) has greatly enhanced our research approach and raised awareness around the need to analyse complex social processes in relation to gender dynamics. For example, research is now attuned to the gender inequalities that influence poverty currently affecting the communities, especially in the rural areas. This has led to increased understanding of how gender relations influence

economic roles, power and access to resources, and a growing understanding (rather than simply a critique) of power relations. The knowledge generated by recent research has also considerably improved our teaching because we are developing local case studies and examples that encourage students to make connections between their academic work and a world they know and possibly feel they can change.

More recently, the department made a momentous achievement by hosting the 8th global interdisciplinary Women's Worlds Congress. The main objective of the congress was to take stock of gains made by several years of gender scholarship and to assess challenges faced in academia and development practice regarding gender equality and women's empowerment. The congress was an enormous achievement, since it was an international event that was hosted in Africa for the first time, and it attracted an enormous range of scholars and activists from all over the world.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the numerous quantitative and immediately visible achievements of the department, we still have considerable ground to cover. One of our greatest challenges is how to ensure that our research findings and our teaching are put to use in ways that will touch the lives of ordinary men and women. Equally important is how we monitor this goal in the face of extremely heavy teaching loads and the confining male-dominated work culture of the university. Our ideal would be a work environment characterised by meaningful equal opportunity practice, rather than by lip service and token support for a handful of relatively powerful women. It is alarming that all university top management structures currently comprise men. The work environment needs to be made more women-friendly. It also needs to allow space for cross-faculty sharing of knowledge and to encourage lively debate about intellectual and political issues, rather than make staff feel that they should mechanically pursue narrow career objectives.

It is my hope that the Feminist Forum that will soon be created at Makerere University will offer insights and strategies that all at the university can learn from. My survey of the department indicates that ten years have witnessed a rapid growth in the scale of our teaching, the academic advancement of staff members, the volume of our research outputs and the visibility of our profile both nationally and internationally. Since 1991, we have also played an important role in instituting a climate that has made different sectors and role players cognisant of gender analysis and gender transformation as integral aspects of political transformation and intellectual growth.

At the same time, the last decade has raised two dynamics that have significantly weakened our initial goal of actively participating in processes of gender transformation. On one hand, because of the ministry set up by the government, we no longer enjoy our former position of centrality in supporting women's organisations and gender advocacy in the country. The department has increasingly been turned to for human resource training, rather than for the role it could directly play in gender transformation. The already considerable teaching requirements of staff have therefore been supplemented by different forms of practical training. On the other hand, the omnipresent bureaucratic culture of the university has placed constraints on our independent growth, with a culture that values rivalry and careerism putting pressure on us to conform. In the face of these challenges, there is a growing need for us to infuse women's and gender studies with a critical vision of how to translate our resources and teaching into the transformation of institutions and relationships as well as the envisaging of meaningful personal and social freedoms. Given the rapid growth of gender studies programmes and research throughout Africa, it is hoped that this sketch can play a part, however small, in critically analysing the political and economic circumstances that can impinge on research and teaching within the field of women's and gender studies.

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\* The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the department as a whole.

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