



Phenomenological Underpinnings for Gender and Feminist Research in Education: Positioning Twenty-First Century African Contexts

Name: Prof. Fatuma N. Chege (PhD)

Position: Associate Professor of Education, Kenyatta University

Email: chege.fatuma@ku.ac.ke & fatumasee@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper addresses the near-absence of feminist theorisation and methodological considerations as a conceptual gap in the gender research in African contexts. Not only is this perceived gap relevant to research on family and community but it also implicates educational research that mainly focuses on schooling and its interactions with other social institutions to perpetuate subordination of women. Arguably, addressing this conceptual gap effectively with critical and scholarly analytical stances has the potential to enhance the unmasking of the subtle drivers of women's subordination, that are often elusive in gender analysis that is outside the feminist mission. The author uses the analytic and critical methods of philosophy to elucidate and foreground phenomenological underpinnings that influence the construction of gender power relations in the context of feminist theoretical mission which advocates for the understanding of women's subordination through their voices as well as embracing the political task of challenging and dismantling female subordination in society. The philosophical arguments advanced herein, yield recommendations and conclusions based on critical analysis of selected examples that are derived from gender research in African contexts and which are relevant to the feminist agenda. The key objective of this paper is to make theoretical and methodological contribution to the field of gender and educational research that inform researchers working in 21st Century African settings in pursuance of the attainment of the United Nations SDG 5 on ensuring gender equality and not in the least, SDG 4 on quality education and lifelong learning for all.

Key words: feminism, phenomenological underpinnings, feminist theorisation, feminist gender research, feminist methodology

Introduction`

This article is generated from the author's philosophical and historical perspectives gained over a period of two decades as an African female gender researcher, scholar, educator and research mentor. The direct exposure and experience have informed the insights on gender research in Africa that entail analyses of the power relations through which women and men operate in clearly differentiated hegemonic power positionings of each gender. This experience has also elicited the author's interest to explore feminism as an ideological movement whose theoretical and political tasks are sensitive to women and are also deliberately designed to capture data emanating from women's experiences of their situation. Methodologically, the author embraces the philosophical contemporary methods of phenomenology that support

analytical, existential and critical considerations as expounded by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986, p. 50-55). Contextually, phenomenology becomes relevant in focusing on lived experience of a given occurrence, thus making it consistent with the analysis of the phenomena of women's subordination. Reflecting on the underpinnings/foundations upon which the phenomenon of subordination is built, the paper opens itself to the discussion of the human construction of power relations in society derived from Connell's (1986) theorisations of Gender and Power. This approach allows conceptual elucidation and critical interrogation of research practices in the area of gender which tend to ignore second order questions of *why* subordination of women in Africa is perpetuated and *how* it can be eradicated based on convincing research evidence. Arguably, for meaningful transformation to occur in the existing gender power relations, it is imperative to answer the second order questions of *why* and *how*.

According to Njoroge and Bennaars (1986), the analytical approach aims at analysis of the use of language to deduce contextual meanings akin to discourse analysis. This method is pertinent in helping to enhance the understanding of *how* experiences of gender practices are interpreted and concretised within and across social institutions. The phenomenological and existential approach potentially bring gender research into direct contact with the meanings attached to human existence and which can be captured directly through women's and girls' voices. The meanings can further be given life through research processes that capture contexts whose data can be triangulation for purposes of comparison and validation.

The key objective of this paper is four-fold. Firstly, it seeks to present conceptual clarity of feminism as a framework that can add value in gender research in African contexts, specifically in the field of education. Secondly, is to problematize the existing dearth of feminist theorising in gender educational research in the African region with a view to providing space for domesticating feminism within local contexts. Thirdly, the paper undertakes to outline the value addition gained from embracing the feminist approach in gender research as a global imperative in research design. Finally, the paper sets out embed relevant guidelines that would enable researchers to be able to link feminist approaches to gender research in African contexts where women are socialised to silently accept the normalisation of their subordination as a natural given than it is cultural.

Context and Background

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (GoK, 2016). This is a validation of the feminist mission to empower women as a global undertaking. For the success of this mission, SDG 4 underscores the need to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Arguably, education not only empowers people but also potentially equalises humanity through its purposeful orientation towards inclusivity from the perspectives gender which cuts across other categories of society such as disability, marginalisation of minorities by region or life orientations. According to Arnot and Fennel (2008), the emergence of global equality agendas provide a unique opportunity to bring together the diverse understandings emerging from the different trajectories taken by Western and non-western traditions of gender research. Hence, the value entailed in consolidating feminist scholarship and research approaches within gender studies cannot be understated in as far as generating knowledge that informs eradication of female subordination in society.

Importantly, the 21st Century has witnessed a profusion of new thinking in gender studies across the social sciences. This is characterised by the philosophical and political conceptualisations of gender equality in different contexts whose convergence of purpose is women's empowerment, whereby,

The possibility of such confluence has (...) implications for analysis of gender education since (...) there has been relatively little interaction between Western and non-Western research. (...). The formation of a global field of gender educational research (...) implies "*crossing the bridge from development studies to gender and education studies and vice versa*". This field could potentially provide students with a wider internationally focused research terrain and a larger and potentially more useful range of methodological frameworks developed since the 1970s (Arnot & Fennel, 2008, p.1-2).

Earlier, Weiler, (1996) had foreseen the challenge of trying to theorise a just education for women using a single dimensional theoretical perspective to capture the realities that are characterised by complex diversities within and across race, social class and ethnic as well as religious orientations. From an African standpoint, Aidoo (1998) traced the history of feminism in non-African contexts and observed how African gender researchers tended to express discomfort in the use of feminism for fear of being dismissed as aping foreign ideology, imported into Africa to ruin good African women. However, Aidoo (1998) cautioned against falling into the trap of such arguments that may intimidate researchers from developing interest in engaging with the discourse of feminism whose mission is to liberate women from gender-based discrimination locally and globally. These concerns notwithstanding, few gender researchers had embraced feminist theorizing by the turn of the 21st Century possibly due to the fear of backlash from proponents of the patriarchal order who entail majority male beneficiaries.

It was not until the mid-1980s at the Pre-Beijing International Women's Conference in Nairobi ("*Nairobi '85*") that African researchers, mainly women, got a glimpse of gender being prioritised as a factor of analysis as exemplified in the emergent studies as noted in Riria-Ouko's (1986) Kenyan research on the place of women and development, focusing on girls' self-perceptions. Later in Tanzania, Mbilinyi & Mbughunyi (1991) conducted a study that addressed the gender dimension in education, while Kibera (1993) analysed the gendering of academic subjects in Kenyan universities.

Outside the field of education, gender researchers addressed the role of the family, law and politics in the construction power relations and disempowerment of women using the feminist approach in African contexts. The researchers challenged structural discrimination as exemplified in Toungara's (1997) work titled *Women and Family Law in Côte d'Ivoire*, Mikell's (1997) study in Ghana on *Akan Women and Family Courts* and Nzomo's (1997) study titled *Kenyan Women in Politics and Decision Making*. Mikell (1998) argued for the positioning of feminist thought in the African cultural context with the aim of localising feminism in ways that were meaningful to local communities. However, Aidoo (1998) advised that feminist gender research should not only focus on liberation of women but also of the men who may have been socialised to believe that women were not oppressed when they perform "their roles" as society has prescribed within patriarchal settings.

Focusing on patriarchy in feminist gender research

Harding (1987) defines patriarchy as the social order in which men own the means of production, both human and material. In many instances in Africa, it could be perceived that men not only own their children but also their wives through the paying of bride price which Kenyatta (1938) describes among the *Agik y* of Kenya as “marriage insurance”. The colonial administration was guilty of this mistake as the engaged in establishing racialized gender hierarchies. This notwithstanding, patriarchy characterises the majority of social structures not only in Africa but also globally whereby, the position of fathers/men is held as superior to that of mothers/women. In many instances, the female family members are socialised for what is seen as subordinate reproduction and production roles that confine them to the private spaces of the home while the male are steered towards the public sphere of economic production. According of Harding, and from a Western analytical perspective:

Women function as the property of men in the maintenance of the production of new members of the social order; that these relations of production are worked out in the organisation of the kin and family; and that other forms of world, such as production of goods and services for immediate (family) use are generally, although not always, attached to these procreative and socialising function (Harding, 1987:23)

Unlike patriarchy, matriarchy represents the social order through the leadership in society is allocated to the women, thus portraying matriarchy as a reversal of patriarchy (Kabeer, 1994). Because patriarchy is the dominant social order in most of the African societies, it has been contextually linked to the dis-empowerment of women. Feminist gender research is therefore designed to consciously and deliberately challenge patriarchy with a clear objective of creating a new gender order characterised by equality through empowering women. In this context, feminist gender researchers require relevant understanding, knowledge, skills and relevant attitudes upon which to design their research within feminist methodological frameworks that offer tool in terms of methods for generating data and techniques for conducting gender analysis.

Feminism as a global imperative for gender research in education

Feminism as a global concept

Feminism constitutes a diverse field of gender theorising, methodology and analysis that are applied in various contexts globally. The concept of feminism is often described as both a doctrine of equal rights for women as well as an ideology for social equality and emancipation of women (Flax, 1997; Watkins, Rueda and Rodriguez, 1992; Lerner, 1978). It is the ideology that is used to challenge male power and pursue women’s liberation from male oppression globally. Accordingly then, “anyone who shares this concern is a feminist, whether they acknowledge it or not” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 12). This paper is therefore consciously guided by feminist theorising within the human rights perspective focusing on entitlements for women as equal human beings and calls for their emancipation through challenging women’s subordination and oppression.

Africanising the feminist movement in gender research

In Africa, feminism has often been construed as a Western idea, and therefore not only alien but also a threat to the African cultural and traditional norms of gender relations that prioritises masculinities. This perception has resulted in many gender researchers avoiding the use of

feminist theorisation and methodology as a legitimate research orientation to respectively guide their studies and inform on research tools in socially acceptable ways.

For purposes of clarity, the use of feminism to guide research in African requires a relatively deeper reflection on the history of colonialism and how its racialized education agenda ushered in complications of the African gender order. It is argued that the colonial experience disrupted the traditional gender order in which the African woman had enjoyed unique rights of positioning within society that offered its education through pedagogy of difference that entailed observation and participation that was well controlled against the abuse of humanity in society (Bennaars, 1995; Chege, 2001). Ostensibly, the colonial administration effectively positioned African women below all men and all women of other so-called superior races in order of priority beginning with the European men and women; the Asian men and women and finally below the African men (Chege, 2001). This arrangement bore negative implications mostly among the African women and was perpetuated beyond the colonial era through religion and formal education.

While the African gender agenda was perpetuated through the pedagogy of difference which clearly gendered its society, Bennaars (1995) asserts that women's rights to status, was clearly defined within a philosophy that the colonial administration did not care to understand. The colonial education legacy socialised the African woman to accept a positioning not only below the African man but also below all men in all races. It socialised the African man to seek more knowledge and job skills that relocated him from his family and domestic responsibilities. The colonial African education was designed to perpetuate these hierarchies of African inferiority with the African woman receiving the most inferior education. This awareness is critical in understanding how historically; education has contributed to the complexity of contemporary gender concerns in post-colonial Africa and the relevance of feminist thought in guiding gender educational research in African contexts. Hence, for the contemporary gender researcher, it is critical be able to answer the questions, **what is feminism; what do feminists do; who is a feminist** and, specifically, **what role can feminism play** in gender research in African contexts.

According to hooks (1984 & 1997), the African research students who enlist in the field of gender and education ought to be assisted to understand feminism in the context of relevant knowledge, skills and relevant attitude that would enable them to step out of the traditional gender debates and practices with confidence in engaging with feminist thought. Further, hooks argue that this engagement would help shape not only the designing the research but also the collection of relevant data and the analyses of women's subordination.

Arnot and Fennell (2008) cautioned on the tendency of Western feminist researchers to portray difficulties in their research engagements with the gendered cultural diversities and constraints facing women and their emancipation in non-western contexts. This caution underscores the need for African gender researchers to take control of gender research as the experts in their own contexts while contextualising the global feminist mission. Specifically, students of gender and education in Africa require encouragement to engage with feminist theorisation and methodology to help them locate consciously the liberation of women in the local contexts (Griffin, 1985).

What is feminist research?

The question of what constitutes feminist research is pertinent to the African gender researcher. According to Nicole Westmarland (2001), feminist research is the globally accepted scientific and scholarly exploration/investigation of social relations seeking to generate knowledge that draws distinctly on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men. This concern for "**experiential knowledge**" is consistent with philosophical phenomenology that pursues subjective experiences through qualitative research methods to inform on the female perspective. Phenomenology entails a peculiar feature of feminist research that adapts the teachings of philosophers exemplified by the early phenomenologists who include Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These philosophers underscored the role of phenomenology as a philosophical approach that supports the study of human beings, their cultures and the meanings they attach to their lived experiences. These experiences are captured as spoken data that are substantively different from those generated from logical positivist models of quantitative methods. Thus, phenomenologists view the application of the logical positivist model to the study of human beings as inappropriate because it does not address the uniqueness of human life in qualitative contexts (Jean, 1995). Nicole Westmarland (2001) underscores the value of the qualitative approach and methods as being comparatively more appropriate for feminist research as they facilitate access to subjective information by women, about women. Such information provides the basis for constructing subject-centred knowledge that is considered real to the persons whose experiences are reported. In essence, therefore, feminist research is a phenomenological study of women's subordination with a definite purpose of using the research findings to challenge the *status quo*.

The feminist approach to gender research therefore calls for a shift in research design to consciously allow the challenging of the dominant order of gender relations in favour of men. It is envisaged that this approach is purposefully placed to help "create a world which satisfies the needs and powers" that shape equality in human relations (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 246).

Men's power, women's empowerment and the United Nations SDGs

Questions as to why men in many societies seem to have conspired to marginalise women in both public and private space underscores the basis for the feminist mission to question men's assumed power over the women. The apparent unexplained fear of women's empowerment that often manifests itself in socialisation of hostility and contempt of the female gender may explain the observed determination by men in various African societies to hold on to the traditional inequalities that give them controlling advantages and privileges over the women. In this context, education as a socialising agent is implicated in the perpetuation of the pursuant gender inequalities, thus making education a major factor that excites feminist gender research in pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5.

The transformational mandate of SDG 4 on gender equality and SDG 5 on inclusive and equitable quality education embraces in specific ways the essential role of educational gender researchers. The SDG 4 is critical in gender research as it seeks to ensure *inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all*. In Target 4.5 SDG 4 explicitly calls for the elimination of *gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous*

peoples and children in vulnerable situations. Further, to complement this target, SDG 5 articulates clearly the feminist mission to *achieve gender equality and empower women and girls*. In all its six (6) targets, the SDG 5 underscores the feminist task to end gender discrimination and empower women and girls. Implicitly, these two SDGs assume that men have structural power which keeps the women down. Hence, any gender research that ignores the feminist mission stands to stray away from the intended purpose and objective of challenging male power over women.

Feminist analytical frameworks and gender research in African settings

As noted in this paper, feminism focuses on universal ideology that is used to challenge male power and pursue women's liberation from oppression based on their sex (Humm, 1995, p. 94). There are various strands of feminisms that offer different analytical frameworks for gender research. However, for beginners, especially research students in gender and education, it is imperative to familiarise with the three key frameworks of feminist theorisation namely, Marxist Socialist, the Radical and Liberal Feminism. In addition, familiarisation with African feminist thought is important in providing insights into unique scenarios of gender inequalities that are borne out of histories of slavery and colonialism whereby women suffered multiple oppressions of sex and capital.

Marxist socialist feminists focus on class and gender, and advocate for analytical frameworks that address combination of multiple forms of interactions between economic class and gender (Humm, 1995; Arnot, 1996; Chege, 2001). Consequently, this category of feminists is guided by the argument that, "Men have specific material interest in the domination of women and that men construct a variety of institutional arrangements to perpetuate this domination" (Humm, 1995, p. 270). In this context, the gender researcher is advised to focus not only on the conventional monetary economy at workplace but also at the understated free female labour related to procreation and sexual services within the privacy of the home. Contextually, in the Marxist socialist feminist analysis, capitalism is the driving factor for women's subordination whereby men are often accused of exploiting women's free labour (Weiner, 1994; Mitchell and Oakley, 1976). Importantly, African feminists embrace the Marxist socialist analysis in addressing the implications of the history of slavery and colonialism on the African gender agenda and subordination of the African woman in Africa or the diaspora. African women belonged to the lowest class.

Radical Feminists interrogate from a critical perspective, the link between patriarchy and capitalism both of which are in themselves separate forms of oppression, with patriarchy chronologically preceding capitalism (Harvey, 1990:111). Gender analysis in this context is guided by a critique of patriarchy as the defining characteristic of most societies and therefore "all forms of oppression are extensions of male supremacy" (Humm, 1990, p. 111). Gender research in this context is hence directed towards dislodging male hegemony in society and restoring women's position at the centre of social order through conscious retrieval of female-based knowledge and challenging male-centric knowledge as the only valid form of understanding of the world (Dillabough and Arnot 2000).

Finally, **Liberal Feminist** thought is the least abrasive of the three feminist analytic frameworks

and hence the most appealing to institutions that often remain tactfully resistant to gender equality transformations. Many gender researchers in African contexts also tend to align to this framework consciously or unconsciously. While liberal feminism is hailed for advocating equal opportunities for women and girls, Dillabough and Arnot (2000) argue that this approach does not explicitly challenge the unequal conditions which in the first place create and perpetuate gender inequalities that disadvantage the women and girls. Hence, Liberal Feminism has been accused firstly, for not problematizing and exposing the negative implications of the sexual division of labour and secondly, it has been faulted for ignoring patriarchy and male hegemony as the core foundations of female oppression. Thirdly, this framework tends to demonstrate little effort in legitimising female experiences and knowledge about the world. In using this framework, it is important to contextualise the value added in relation to the other feminist analytical frameworks

Who is a feminist gender researcher?

Understanding the mission of a feminist researcher is important for gender researchers in African settings whose gender dynamics may escape the scrutiny of outsiders. Basically, a feminist gender researcher is one who chooses to identify with the various strands of feminism and link this to the nature of the research problem being pursued. Feminist researchers can either be male or female, African or non-African, youthful or relatively old in age, providing that they uphold the mission of understanding and challenging women's subordination and oppression. African feminist gender researchers have a choice of three different major affinities to lean on in pursuing their localised agenda either within politics, economics or in education. The Marxist socialist feminist researcher, for instance, will interrogate gender power relations within the interaction of economic class and race while the radical feminist researcher will focus on the role of patriarchy and sexuality in perpetuation of oppression of women. The liberal feminists will lean towards enhancement of individual freedoms and equality of opportunities for women and girls. In all these choices, the African is obliged to be reflexive of realities of culture and gender situations.

What do feminist researchers in education do differently?

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that because man defines humanity as male, the woman has been relegated to a position relative to man and hence, has been defined as the "other", who is not man. For this reason, feminist gender researchers engage in seeking understanding and consequently demonstrate implications of gender power relations on the construction of womanhood and girlhood in cultural contexts that distinguish them from manhood/boyhood which is often allocated privileges and unequal entitlements. Feminist researchers in education are obliged to engage in the use of relevant knowledge and skills to enable them generate data that can explain women's lives in relation to that of men in ways that bear existential and phenomenological significance to them (Harding, 1987, p. 7). The feminist gender researcher portrays commitment in generating data that reveal women's contextualised experiences using women's own voices and expressions that bear meaning to the women. It is for this reason that Harding (1987) explained the need for gender researchers to include women participants in the research design and in the implementation of the process as well as in the dissemination of research findings.

The centrality of voice in feminist gender research

Since research is about revealing the evidence that can be validated, Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1997) are on point in arguing for the centrality of women in revealing the reality of womanhood and underscoring the need to –methodologically– pay attention to women’s and girls’ voices as well as their silences (what they do not verbalise) in relation to their lives. In the field of education, these would include **voices** of women rising above difficult times; their histories and cultural heritage; their childhoods, teenage years, and young adulthood; of being wives and mothers; being single women, getting education and jobs or being in the paid and unpaid workforces. Further, Gilligan (1985) advocates for the voices of women (and girls) about institutions they find themselves in (or are excluded from or in carcerated in). Equally important are the voices related to life in schools, hospitals, churches, work organisations, parliaments, bureaucracies, unions, marriages, prisons and so on. In addition are the voices of women’s experiences with men, of being in different social classes, castes, ethnicities and racial backgrounds; of their mystified bodies and of their related reflections. Of equal importance are women’s (and girls’) voices of their illnesses and addictions, of menstruation and of menopause and related stigma; of giving birth, growing older, having different abilities and disabilities, and even of dying. Most of the women experiences have often remained outside the male-centric experience of being human and excluded from the public mainstream of masculine epistemology that masks the female knowledge of the world that creates them.

As Narayan (2000) argued for the voices of communities living in poverty to be considered as core to knowledge creation, so are the voices of women and girls in the construction of knowledge about gender relations and gender equality within and through education in different settings. Contextually, Sofola (1998) points out the problematics that the language –specifically the English language – presents a challenge to non-English speakers mainly because of its gendered tendency whereby the feminine is often an appendage of the masculine. In this case, women’s voices in their local African (or other) languages are important in offering authentic comparative data. According to Harding (1987), feminist research does not derive its value just in the questions that are asked women – but more significantly, on **those that are not asked** – and which are as determinative of the total picture as any answers that can be discovered about women. Harding (1987, p. 7) further proposes that girls and women be allowed to reveal what their experiences are in their own terms and in their own voices in the best way they know how. Arguably, real understanding of the impact of female subordination requires attention to the stories embedded in women’s voices as narrated by the women themselves. The feminist woman-centred approach ushers in a different form of understanding the socially constructed and gendered world.

Feminism as a different way of ‘seeing’ the research problem

Feminist researchers are usually confronted with questions of gender relations from a diversity of social institutions, including various types of educational settings that require problem solving. The researchers therefore, need to seek clarity by interrogating the emergent problem through feminist questions that are guided by relevant theorisation, such as:

- What entails women’s oppression of girl’s marginalisation in a specific context?
- How can the current process of schooling be transformed to offer girls environments

that are responsive to their feminine needs?

- How are educational institutions implicated in perpetuating female oppression?
- What should be done to eradicate women's subordination and bring about empowering change for women in specific learning contexts?

The qualitative type of questions cited have potential to bring into focus different ways of seeking evidence that moves away from the equally important statistical questions of *how many girls, what is the difference between X and Y; to what extent.*

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the need to pursue feminist questions effectively strengthened the move towards use of qualitative approaches and linking these to the capturing of lived experiences specifically from women and girls in the context of gender relations. The use of thick descriptive data began to reveal insights that had been lacking in the quantitative statistical surveys that hardly captured the answers to the questions of *how* and *why* women remained subordinated to men in most societies even when education had long been accepted as the means liberate humanity from all forms of oppressions (Freire, 1973).

The feminist approach to gender research facilitated the deeper understanding of violence against African girls and women through African feminist researchers who successfully linked gendered violence with the patriarchal ideology that thrived on subordination of women in society as exemplified in the studies of Wamahiu and Chege (1996) titled, *Girls' Schooling and Democratic Culture towards Gender Equity in Kenya*, as well as Chege and Mati (1998) titled *Researching Sexual Harassment in Education Institutions*. These voice-based studies which were disseminated interactively for discussion using role plays in various educational institutions in Africa brought to the fore the near taboo-subject of sexual harassment. The same attracted attention of print media as evident in some headline reading "*taboo subject boldly borne*" in reference to the findings of rampant sexual harassment against school girls within public transport as well as within primary and secondary schools (Chege, 1997, Chege, Rimbui and Olembo, 1995).

By the turn of the 21st Century, there was notable evidence of feminist thinking within the gender discourse and among researchers in the African region as evidenced in Mannathoko, Maziel and Commeyr as (2001) who used the Voices of Children and Women against Discrimination to champion changes in gender relations via use of anecdotes. Chege's (2001) study focusing on Schooling and Transitions to Adulthood also demonstrated feminist thinking through analysis of vocalised experiences of adolescent school girls and school boys. Related research focus and methodology is found in studies investigating construction of gender and sexual identities within and through education in Eastern and Southern Africa Region (Pattman and Chege, 2003; Akunga, Kwamboka and Muia, 2004; Tapela, and Maveneke, 2004; Chilisa, Dube, Tsheko and Mazile, 2005; ZWRC, 2005; Chege, 2006).

One decade into the 21st Century witnessed increased effort to strengthen gender research in Africa with feminist theorisation as a driving force. Notably, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) implemented research projects titled *Strengthening Gender Research in Africa* (FAWE, 2010). Alongside these were studies that explicitly employed feminist frameworks and methodology to address marginalisation of girls and women in education as exemplified in Opit (2014) in a thesis focusing on *University Gender Policy for Science Students that potentially marginalises secondary school girls in Uganda*. In a study of *Kenyan Boys Becoming Men*, Chege and Likoye (2015) also interrogated the phenomenon of boys dropping

out of primary school while girl peers proceeded with schooling. Mbirianjau (2016) explored the trend of *Increasing Female Participation in Kenyan Public Universities* which raised critical questions on the gendering of university courses with patriarchy being blamed for the relatively fewer female university students opting to become scientists.

Expectations from feminist research

Understanding the role that feminist theorisation and methodology can play in strengthening gender research is core to the eventual implementation of findings in meaningful ways that are embedded in nuances captured through the women's voices and which are often lost in non-feminist approaches. Such nuances have potential to enhance ownership of the findings based on insights that inform interventions for the empowerment of women. According to Freire (1970 and 1973), the active involvement of oppressed communities in the formulation and implementation of education that is capable of raising their critical consciousness provides the much needed drive for such communities to engage in conscious process of liberating themselves from the oppressions they face. Conscientisation thrives where spaces are created for dialogue among oppressed group(s) in pursuance of common understandings that can facilitate changing their situations. Similarly, the feminist gender agenda embraces conscientisation as the basis of empowering women and men using new knowledge that is hinged on women's experiences in the context of their subordination in different situations. The feminist research methodology, therefore, just like in Freire's conscientisation in the education of the oppressed, has potential to yield desired outcomes of women's empowerment through women's involvement.

Feminist methods and methodology in a nutshell

Gwendolyn Mikell (1997, p. 234) underscores the value added when researchers engage women in dialogue as part of the feminist methodology arguing that by speaking to the women and examining their perceptions, "we stand to learn much". In addition:

We can glean important insights into socio-political dynamics of the present period, we can begin to shape a more sophisticated methodology and analytical frameworks for the integration of gender into socio-political analysis and we can identify new areas of further research" or new ways of doing gender research (Gwendolyn Mikell (1997, p. 234).

In traditional African contexts, speaking with women as a way of generating knowledge has not been a culturally common research feature as men would often tend to speak on behalf of the women in public spaces. The men would control what was to be divulged about the women. This situation may explain why feminist theorisation and methodology is almost absent in the works of most of the African gender researchers who often opt to use the quantitative survey coupled with a few interviews. A note worthy feature is that unlike the traditional statistical surveys used in gender research, feminist methodology is characterised by explicit subject-centred methods and techniques for gathering data that include listening to (interrogating) informants, observing behaviour and/or examining historical records methodically in compliance with the feminist gender mission that requires researchers to:

Listen *carefully* to how women informants think about their lives and men's lives and

critically to how traditional social scientists conceptualise women's and men's lives. They observe behaviours of women and men and which traditional social scientists have not thought significant. They seek examples of newly recognised patterns in historical data (Harding, 1987, p. 2)

It is therefore not surprising that the life history approach is a favourite technique in feminist research methodology particularly among communities where story telling has been used traditionally to educate and perpetuate traditional indigenous knowledge and practices. Humm (1995) explains that in feminist-based knowledge, life histories help in deep analyses of women's lives based on their oral narratives, letters, diaries, and autobiographies. In addition, innovative techniques that are women-friendly are also encouraged in the process of generating knowledge from women's and girl's perspectives. These may include use of memory work, photo-voice and drawings which may be used to generate new knowledge that is grounded in the women's and girls' perspectives and recollections of their experiences compared to that of men (Chege, 2006).

Can men engage in feminist research?

As observed herein, the essence of feminist research and methodology is not hinged primarily on the gender of the researcher but on the commitment that researchers demonstrate towards feminist theoretical and political mission to challenge and dismantle the essence of women's subordination. Hence, regardless of biological sex, researchers who are pro-feminist can choose to develop research skills, techniques and relevant theoretical and practical knowledge that would enable them to raise critical feminist questions and engage in relevant research. Considering that men are important actors in women's subordination and oppression, Harding (1987: 11) points out how foolhardy it would be to assume that men are incapable of making important contributions to feminist research and scholarship and even to the empowerment of women. Hence, it would be considered reasonable to include proportions of both genders in a feminist oriented research team. Harding (1987) further draws attention to the history of feminist thought to which male philosophers made substantive contribution in addressing issues of women's empowerment as exemplified by John Stuart Mill (1869) in his work of *Subjection of Women*. Also, Friedrich Engels' (1884) analysis of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* linked the formation of the modern family to the rise of class system and capitalistic practices that resulted in women's subordination and exploitation of their labour. For Karl Marx (1867) in his *Capital*, women and children are lumped together as the first line of capitalist resource manipulation with women being conditioned by a class society to remain politically indifferent, unorganised and passive thereby rendering them vulnerable to exploitation. This historical fact demonstrates the theoretical and practical value that men as stakeholders in women's empowerment can bring to the feminist research agenda.

Ethical considerations in feminist gender research

The phenomenological nature of the feminist gender research and the mission to liberate and empower women entails deep and personal engagements with the subjects. This calls for explicit demonstration of commitment to ethical considerations that ensure not only protection of the research participants but also embracement of principles of mutual respect, honesty, care, sensitivity, empathy, accountability, confidentiality, reflexivity, flexibility and responsiveness

(Pattman and Chege, 2003; Humm, 1995). This value-based ethical stance requires conscious effort to continually reflect on the effects of research activities and methods on the participants' emotional wellbeing. Hence, keen observation as well as asking questions that are geared towards ensuring connectivity with the participants constitutes good research practice. These may include the following:

- Have I disclosed fully the nature and implications of the research to the participants? (**honesty and reflexivity**)
- Does this research technique empower women participants as advocated in feminist theory and practice? (**relevance** to feminist mission)
- What am I doing to ensure protection of women and girls from potential harm emanating from their participation in this research? (**sensitivity and care**)
- How keenly am I listening to the concerns of participants? (**responsiveness**)
- How will the knowledge generated inform feedback to the participants in critical and empowering ways? (**accountability**)

Diversity of data sources and methods

To ensure meaningful and impactful research findings, the gender research that adapts feminist methodology foregrounds the importance of using a variety of data sources just as much as it does the diversity of methods and techniques that are sensitive to women. The primary data sources entail primarily the following:

- Women/or girls who are participants/subjects in the research.
- Men and boys who have relevance to the study community (participants and catchment communities)
- Key stakeholders relevant to the study problem being addressed. E.g. school teachers, religious organisation, parents, peers, other related actors

In sourcing the data, it is important to link the sources with appropriate data collection methods that are commensurate with the feminist methodology. These include a combination of at least four (4) of the **traditional** methods/techniques that may include the **relatively new** and innovative ones.

Traditional methods of generating data

1. Individual in-depth interviews recorded verbatim to ensure integrity of data
2. Focus group discussions that should also be recorded
3. Group interviews/focus group discussion
4. Life histories
5. Anecdotal narratives
6. Observation and recording (field-notes, still camera or video)
7. Documentary analysis of policy papers, official reports, research reports and others that offer context

Relatively new participatory techniques of generating data

- Photo voice (participants take pictures that tell a life story)
- Drawings and graphics to portray a life story

- Collage of existing (pictorials arranged to tell a life story)
- Memory work entailing journal, diary or tape recordings of life events
- Other equally innovative techniques that are participant friendly

5.4 Analysing data from feminist gender research

To ensure effective analysis of data it is important to unpack the thick-descriptive format guided by the following procedures.

1. Listening several times through the recordings and taking notes
2. Transcribing from oral/voice data to documented data (transcript)
3. Uploading transcripts onto a relevant qualitative data analysis software such as the *Atlas Ti*, and *NUDIST* or others.
4. Reading and listening with a gender eye/ear to identify what the participants are saying (or not saying)
5. Coding of thematic issues based on pre-determined and emergent themes
6. Identifying and grouping thematic chunks of data in readiness for report/thesis drafting
7. Drafting the report/thesis
8. Disseminating to the research community and taking feedback
9. Including relevant community feedback into relevant gaps to enhance the report/thesis

Findings, recommendations and conclusions

In this section, findings of a philosophical nature are presented followed by recommendations and conclusions from discussions pursued herein.

Findings based on theoretical and methodological discussion

The analytical exploration presented in this paper has yielded four (4) key findings as outlined herein. **Firstly**, contrary to contrary stereotypes, the understanding of feminist theorising and methodology is relevant in directing purposeful engagement with gender research in African contexts. **Secondly**, the feminist methodology, which advocates voice-based techniques for data gathering is consistent with the methods of oral history and narrations of human life stories that characterise African traditional means of perpetuating knowledge in participatory and inclusive ways. **Thirdly**, secondary data retains its epistemological value in helping to locate the research problem within existing knowledge and theoretical consideration. It serves in identifying gaps that can be complemented by primary data that is eventually generated to capture perspectives on the realities of women's gendered and subordinated lives. **Finally**, the feminist approach to gender research bears relevance in African contexts, both in its theoretical mission of understanding the nature of women's subordination, the processes through which the subordination is perpetuated within the various social contexts, and not in the least, the feminist political task of challenging and eradicating women's subordination in society using research evidence.

Recommendations

This paper undertook a philosophical analysis of feminist gender research using the analytic and critical methods of philosophy that allowed engagement with the second order research concerns of *why* and *how* as opposed to the *what* questions that focuses on descriptions of the status quo of women's and girls' subordination. The discussions have attracted three main recommendations that are derived from the findings and linked to policy and practice.

Regarding policy consideration, it is recommended that in the designing of any gender research, the researcher needs to demonstrate explicitly the theoretical understandings of underpinnings that capture the feminist mission and task to empower women and by extension girls. The researcher should address the question of how the participants' voices would influence policy effectively by including the participants' voices and/or their expressions in the various dissemination workshops, seminars and conferences. In terms of practice, the methodology should include techniques that are unequivocally friendly to female participation in the research process with the main aim of generating answers on how women compared to men interpret subordination. In addition, the researcher is obliged to demonstrate how women stand to benefit from the research findings while forging strategic partnership between men and women in pursuit of gender equality as stipulated in SDG 5.

Conclusions

Four main conclusions are derived from this article. Firstly, while the origin of feminist thought has often times been considered un-African and therefore alien, both the feminist vision and mission are universal and hence, are relevant to the African contexts just as are the SDGs 4 and 5 among others. Secondly, because contemporary feminist gender research is about commitment to a defined research methodology that is consistent with the mission of empowering women, it invites participation of both the women and men researchers who ascribe to the same mission. Thirdly, coming from a male-driven tradition of positivistic research methodologies, it is imperative for gender researchers to consciously understand the essential point of departure that distinguishes the feminist gender research in terms of theorising and methodology whose primary purpose is to challenge women's subordination and ensure their empowerment. Finally, the fact that feminist gender research recognises the value of participation of women as actors in the research process, it bears considerable potential in helping women and girls to become actively critical of the impacts of gender power relations in their gendered communities.

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