CODESRIA'S Broader Experience with Gender: Towards a Feminist Epistemic Breakthrough with Persistent Structural Limitations

Introduction

CODESRIA was created in response to the endemic social stagnation and a certain degree of confusion regarding the path forward that resulted from the weight of neocolonialism in Africa. Although African countries had acquired, or were resolutely engaged in the struggle for, independence, the prospects of this milestone were not immediately or even subsequently evident on numerous fronts. The perpetual domination and exploitation of the continent were woven into the mechanisms of the global capitalist system to the extent that Africa lagged behind other continents in many areas of development and social progress. On the intellectual front, the creation of CODESRIA was supposed to provide a revolutionary space where the structural issues that impeded social progress could be dismantled.

The preamble of CODESRIA's charter stipulates that it was established to provide an institutional space to help address issues faced by African countries that had been newly liberated or were still engaged in the struggle to acquire at least nominal independence. It was a space where work could be done to promote social science research on the African continent to produce 'proper information and knowledge' about the problems plaguing the continent so that 'the

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African people' might apply their agency in steering 'the processes of sustainable development'.

Article 24 states that 'The Executive Secretary shall ensure *gender* [emphasis is author's], generational, sub-regional, linguistic and disciplinary balance in the activities of CODESRIA'. The Charter refers to African and non-African 'scholars' in social sciences, in consistently gender-neutral language. In this reflective essay, I address some of CODESRIA's achievements with regard to gender while examining what I consider to be congenital limitations.

This essay is organised into three main parts. The first discusses key gender-focused programmes, activities and achievements of CODESRIA since its founding. The second addresses the fundamental and inevitable flaws and shortcomings of CODESRIA. The third section considers gender-focused reflections on possible paths for structural regeneration for more relevance and responsiveness.

Key Gender-focused Programmes, Activities and Achieve-ments of CODESRIA since its Inception

To situate my analysis of gender matters in CODESRIA, it is useful to clarify that I returned to Africa from the United States in the early 1980s as a young scholar with very strong interests in gender issues[1], and joined the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) or Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement, (AFARD), which was housed on CODESRIA's premises in Dakar. I also became interested in and joined CODESRIA, with encouragement from my spouse, who was then a young professor at the University of Liberia. He shared his exciting meeting in Monrovia with Professor Cadman Atta-Mills, an outstanding Ghanaian economist with major contributions to policy issues across Africa. His enthusiasm in retelling that chance encounter was inspiring to me.

As a group of committed AAWORD/AFARD scholars, most of whom were also involved in CODESRIA, we aired pressing articulations of CODESRIA's inadequate treatment of the gender factor in epistemological matters and scholarly output. As a result, a major workshop on 'Gender Analysis and African Social Science', sponsored by CODESRIA, was

held in Dakar in September 1991. I was invited, and presented a paper titled '*Éducation de la Population Féminine et Pouvoir des Femmes en Afrique: Comment Rompre le Cercle Vicieux*?' The revised papers of the workshop were published in the book co-edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow, *Engendering African Social Sciences* (Imam, Mama and Sow 1997). My paper was included in this book, with the title 'Educating Africa's Girls and Women: A Conceptual and Historical Analysis of Gender Inequality'. The French edition of the book was co-published in 2004 by Karthala in Paris and CODESRIA in Dakar.

The second result was that CODESRIA established a Gender Institute; it ran on an annual basis for twenty-eight years, with one exception. In June 2023, one of CODESRIA's 'Reflections Meetings' was held in Kampala with a specific focus on 'CODESRIA's Experience with Gender Research: Towards a Feminist Epistemic Breakthrough'. My presentation in the panel on 'Gender Research & Programming at CODESRIA: Taking Stock of a 28-year History' was titled 'Gender Research at CODESRIA: The Scientific Committee Experiences'.

My reflections were informed in great part by my broader experiences as a member of CODESRIA and my work as coordinator of the Multinational Working Group (MWG) on Higher Education and the Regeneration of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Systems in Africa. During this time I was active in higher education research in several ways. For MWG, CODESRIA held two workshops in Dakar, in June 2005 and December 2006. I published an article in the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* (2005), wrote the Green Book *Higher Education in Africa: Crises, Reforms and Transformation*, published by CODESRIA in 2006, and did the empirical studies that led to the book manuscript co-edited with Zandile Mbuya, submitted to CODESRIA with the title *African Higher Education in Transition: Recurrent Impediments, Emerging Challenges and New Potentialities* (forthcoming). I also served as a member of CODESRIA'S Scientific Committee from 2009 to 2015.

Without systematically reviewing CODESRIA's gender-focused activities, it is worth acknowledging its achievements and promises in this regard. Although it was through the struggle and push of women in CODESRIA that the 1991 workshop on gender and African social sciences took place, which led to the aforementioned seminal book in English and French, the workshop played a major role in producing and disseminating knowledge informed by gender and feminist epistemology and methodology. This knowledge was made available to the academic community in Africa, the African diaspora and globally.

CODESRIA's mission included supporting other African organisations in need, especially with the same goal of contributing to the collective efforts to promote social progress on the continent. In this context, CODESRIA's provision of office space for AAWORD was fitting. However, although practically this arrangement was a welcome relief for AAWORD, in the patriarchal construct of male supremacy and female marginality, given the male dominance in CODESRIA and limited importance accorded to gender issues, the meaning of this office space arrangement created an ambiguous atmosphere regarding the gendered and hierarchical conception of the organisation of the social space.

In the next section, this reflection focuses on possible explanations for why CODESRIA did not firmly and unequivocally adopt a gender-aware and -committed institutional space.

Fundamental Limitations of CODESRIA on Gender Matters

As it was conceptualised, designed and executed, CODESRIA was created as a liberal institutional space for progressive, organic intellectuals engaged in the production of knowledge and other social pursuits towards the liberation of the African continent and its social system, and to promote sustainable social progress. However, given the primacy of the Marxist guiding framework, the actual power of factors of social differentiation and reproduction were not taken seriously. The notion of intersectionality, in terms of how social class might interact with other factors (e.g. gender, race) to produce, maintain and reproduce inequality and inadequate social transformations, was not considered at all. Indeed, the Marxist perspectives of the capitalist structure in class terms, though valid, constituted the sole focus with the assumption, and flaw, that if and when social classes were dismantled there would be equality for all including women, practically ignoring the specificities of gender-focused oppression even in its intersection with class.

There are four types of intellectuals. There are the producers of knowledge from the ivory tower. Then there are 'organic intellectuals', who could be considered to be self-appointed vanguards with a social mission in

terms of producing knowledge for the greater good in their systematic commitment to the cause of the entire society. Another is 'career-oriented intellectuals', whose guiding ethos is individualism and at times the selfish pursuit of their career geared to their personal gain. They may still hold strong family values of solidarity and may use some of their gain to fulfil family obligations. The fourth group of intellectuals includes those who may not consistently participate in intellectual production, and do so mainly for their economic survival and the maintenance of a certain standard of living that elevates them above the masses. Either by necessity or by the absence of consciousness of the role that intellectual production plays in society, they tend not to take an active part in intellectual production and direction.

In this essay, my main argument is not that women necessarily wanted to join CODESRIA in various capacities, including management/leadership and research, and participate as any of the four categories of intellectuals. However, given the varying dispositions of people with higher education qualifications, if CODESRIA had made the efforts to create a more gender-inclusive space, it is plausible that more women would have joined. However, history informs us that such efforts were not consistently made.[2]

It is important to indicate that, at the time of the creation of CODESRIA in 1973, generally across the African continent, there was an endemic gender imbalance. The female population was underrepresented at all levels of the education system, with the imbalance growing from the lower to the higher education levels. Not long after CODESRIA

was established, a small group of African women met in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1976 to debate creating an institutional space where African women could exercise their agency to guide the production of knowledge on Africa. Subsequently, a year later AAWORD/AFARD was formally established as a feminist organisation dedicated to promoting positive social change in the conditions of women for their own rights and as central agents in African societies. AAWORD/AFARD 'brought together female African intellectuals to promote equal rights between men and women at the continental level and contributed greatly to the advancement of the status of African women'.[3]

The gender imbalance in African education had consequences especially in preparation for research at higher education levels. The historical causes include the decision by most African families not to send their girl-children to colonial schools, be they missionary schools in British and Belgian colonies or state schools in French colonies. Regardless of the colonial policies, at independence, all African countries inherited the European patriarchal values that relegated women to an inferior social status for which learning was deemed marginal. A process of negative homogenisation followed, whereby the African values that had empowered women were destroyed while those that were actually or potentially less favourable towards women were reinforced by the European version of supreme patriarchal domination. The combination of these two phenomena led to the entrenched gender imbalance in African educational systems and women's unequal participation in the production of knowledge.

Even though there are some southern African exceptions of women's participation in education at higher levels, the fundamental culture of women's marginalisation in social processes prevails. Thus, as an institutional space designed to critique the neocolonial social space, CODESRIA did not apply policies and practices to treat gender equality or attempt to close the gender gap in all dimensions of the institution, from the programmes to the leadership. This was most notable in the position of Executive Secretary, although the presidency has been occupied by a few women and there have been some women in the executive and scientific committees.

Another fundamental factor that has contributed to ignoring or postponing serious consideration of the gender matter is the underlying core ideology of Marxism, with its ensuing epistemological and methodological predilections and institutional policies and practices. The unconditional and blind application of Marxist ideology and subsequent methodology and academic and administrative policies resulted in unintended and perverse effects. In a work, ironically dedicated to the founder of CODESRIA, I wrote that the ideology was a major limitation, because 'the classical Marxist analysis did not recognise the primordial and recurring role of the control of the mind and the ability to neutralise the critical mind through the instrument of education imposed by and/or inherited from colonization' (Assié-Lumumba 2023: 28–29).

Indeed, orthodox Marxist analysis stipulates that social class is the key defining factor of social differentiation and structural inequality. The unfortunate convergence of, on the one hand,

the inherited primitive European patriarchal system transferred to and entrenched in African culture, and on the other hand the Marxist approach, with primacy of social class as the key or nearly the sole determinant of inequality, produced some of the major limitations in CODESRIA's gender policies and undertakings. This resulted in what could be termed a de facto debilitating 'boys' club', with fervent male gatekeepers who did not hesitate to exclude even some males whom they perceived not to be solidly committed to the continuation of territoriality, to protect the boundaries with a certain degree of '*copinage*' with the backing of some critical external supporters, even if they were staunch advocates of gender equality in other spaces. In this context, the efforts of genuinely gender-sensitive male members could not advance successfully for change. In this context, the dominant male culture was also protected by some of the few females who were let in by the powerful gatekeepers.

An Epistemic Shift Towards a Gender-focused Structural Regeneration

In this first quarter of the twenty-first century—that is, more than six decades after African countries started to acquire their nominal political independence—the number of female students and graduates in higher education remains insignificant. Indeed, despite early postcolonial commitments and policies adopted to increase overall enrolments and redress inequalities, African states did not sustain the pace for closing the gender gap, especially at the higher education levels where the imbalance is the greatest. Unequal gender distribution is a major characteristic of most institutions. For instance, women are overwhelmingly underrepresented

in scientific fields and sub-fields. And disciplinary gender clusters are reproduced in the labour market and on the occupational ladder. Such contexts do not give women the space to reach their maximal potential and realise their capabilities. The issue is not the existence of clusters per se. These become a problem only because they contain embedded social values and, consequently, processes of simultaneous feminisation and devaluation of fields, sub-fields and occupations. Involuntary and negative gender clusters, especially in systems that are built on a co-educational philosophy, constitute an indicator of marginalisation.

The unfortunate, unequal, gendered and disciplinary clusters lead to limited representation of women in critical positions in the domains of politics, the economy, education and knowledge production. In the current context of globalisation, the information age and knowledge economy, the lack of or limited access to education constitutes an absolute hindrance. Decision-making processes and planning miss the concerns, viewpoints and inputs of women; this constitutes an infringement on their rights to exercise their capabilities and a loss for Africa if it cannot benefit from their insight.

In addition to the low number of women at every level of the formal education system, especially higher education, there is a broader philosophical and political question concerning the nature of education itself and the type of development to which those who acquire it are expected to contribute. In the rush to expand education at the beginning of nominal independence, many leaders failed to address fundamental questions concerning the kind of education and kind of development needed.

CODESRIA helped to fill a void in the neocolonial context of the 1970s. But it limited its potential by not taking seriously the gender aspect for social transformation. It would have been helpful if a vigorous debate had been held at the founding of the Council. At the time, there were relatively few African women in the scholarly landscape, as a result of interactions between Africans' position and European policies regarding the significance and implication of European education for African girls and women. However, it was necessary to include women to emulate the African 'gendered and equal' philosophy that African scholars had produced even before the founding of CODESRIA (Diop 1959, 1996; Steady 1981; Amadiume 1987; Assié-Lumumba 1996, 2000, 2007; Mama et al. 1997; Oyewumi, 1997, 2011).

It is of key importance to break the psychological and physical barriers between schooling in general, especially higher education, and the female population, in part to prepare for building capacity to contribute to relevant and transformative knowledge production by women, and to inform society as a whole and policy-makers of the importance of women's contribution to knowledge production for their rights and the interest of the broader society. The underlying philosophy must be inclusive and democratic and show commitment to gender equality, which means that women and men have to be equally valued and involved with knowledge and advocacy through CODESRIA.

Concluding Reflections

Despite CODESRIA's impressive output of publications (books and journals) and other activities, including the Gender Institute

and Governance Institute, the persistently dominant culture of the interface of the 'boys' club' and '*copinage*' with a complex system of institutional gatekeepers has not allowed CODESRIA to develop its promise. It has allowed, and even conveniently co-opted, some women as male surrogates despite the continued discourse of gender equality. Hence, the few truly progressive male voices wanting to promote structural change have been drowned in the Council despite their genuine efforts.

Colonial policies led to African countries inheriting the European patriarchal values of the time, which dictated for women an inferior social status and marginal learning and social space in the colonies as in Europe itself. A process of negative homogenisation, whereby African values that had empowered women were ignored or destroyed while those that were actually or potentially less favourable found new fertile ground, led to a foundation for gender inequality. The combination of these two phenomena led to the entrenched gender imbalance in the educational system, which, ironically, the educational process contributes to reproduce.

Despite early postcolonial com-mitment and policies adopted to increase overall education enrolment and redress inequality, African states did not sustain the pace for closing the gender gap, especially at the higher education levels. Unequal gender distribution of education in quantity and type is a major characteristic of most institutions. Such contexts do not allow the space for women to achieve their potential and to realise their capabilities. This is where CODESRIA could have made a clear difference through its policies and practices. The benevolent Marxist institutional framework regarding gender and the ensuing policies and practices hid damaging gender-insensitive approaches that needed transformation towards the initially stated goal for social progress.

In my own reflections as both a woman and an educator, I am aware that there were, and still are, a lot of missed opportunities in equipping females and harnessing their potential for the full potential of the continent. CODESRIA as an organisation had, and still has, the opportunity to fully employ the potential of its female collaborators and thus raise the bar in the language of gender inclusivity. Although through history there is evidence of the failure by most newly independent African states to create and sustain the momentum to close gaps caused by gender discrimination, there is still hope and a need to do so. A good starting point would be to go beyond the mere rhetoric of equal education opportunities and actually ensure that the right conditions are put in place for the equal participation of men and women across the many relevant arenas pertaining to the development of the continent.

Policies and practices can be the springboards to catapult change. There are glaring holes in the benevolent Marxist institutional framework regarding gender and the ensuing policies and practices that are evidently detrimental to the inclusion and equal participation of all productive and capable members of societies. I am, however, sure that, and will conclude by saying: despite the negative consequences of decades of structural gender-based inequalities and deferment of equal opportunities for all the capabilities: IT IS NOT TOO LATE AND IT IS A SINE QUA NON FOR AFRICA'S ADVANCEMENT!

Notes

1. One of my two master's degrees from Université Lyon (now Université Lumière) in France was on understanding gender-based social organisations and women's space and roles. It was titled 'La Femme Ivoirienne dans la Vie Politique: La Femme Baoulé N'Gbongbo de l'Exode à la Pacification (1730–1915)', Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université Lyon II, Lyon, France (1974). A revised and enhanced version was published later as Les Africaines dans la Politique: Femmes Baoulé de Côte d'Ivoire, Paris: L'Harmattan (1996).

2. From the early days of education in Europe, when churches shaped institutions of higher learning, to after states succeeded in their struggle for secularisation, in accordance with some church dogmas women were excluded from the intellectual forum, production of knowledge and policy-making. Although by the time African countries started to acquire their independence, European institutions had undergone transformations, African universities, even those that were created after independence, de facto emulated some of these European sociohistorical ivory tower characteristics.

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Association_of_African_Women_for_Research_and_Development#cite_note-2

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