

FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO GEOGRAPHY COMING FROM, AND FOCUSED ON, GHANA

Kelsey B. Hanrahan

This is a brief discussion of feminist and gender-focused geography from Ghana. I am deeply indebted to the work of Mariama Awumbila at the University of Ghana (UG), a geographer who has written elsewhere on the development of feminist and gender-focused research in Ghana, in African institutions, and by African scholars (see Awumbila 2007a, 2007b). Women's activism and scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa is sometimes labeled "feminist," but the term is controversially linked to Western ideas. Today in Ghana, young women may embrace issues of equality and empowerment but shun the label as elitist, while older women more readily identify with it (Bawa 2018). Recognizing this, in this piece I cautiously refer to feminism in Ghana in discussing the relationship between women's rights activism in the first few decades of Ghana's nationhood and the development of practice and scholarship aimed at addressing gender inequalities that involved activist-academics (Bawa 2018), but I will also refer more broadly to scholarship as gender-focused. I begin with a brief discussion of the development of feminist and gender-focused scholarship in Ghana. I then speak to the progress made over the last decade since Awumbila's reviews were published. I will briefly examine the contributions made by geographers both from within and outside of Ghana who have contributed to the documentation of women and gender dynamics in Ghanaian societies, and have worked to critique feminist and gendered analyses imported from global North contexts.

Feminist Activism and Scholarship in Ghana

Starting in the later decades of the 20th century, women in sub-Saharan Africa have been mobilized in research and action towards women's equality and empowerment. They have worked to understand the role of colonialism and postcolonial society in the "restoration of conventional masculinity" (Mama 2003, 102), which creates and strengthens patriarchal structures. It has been argued that feminist activism arose from the ground up through participation in, and challenging of, postcolonial national development, while feminism in postsecondary education was fueled by external motivations, such as development initiatives and governmental policy (Mama 2003; Awumbila 2007a, 2007b). The two are closely linked, however. Feminist activist organizations have operated with the understanding that there is a critical "link between knowledge and power, and [they] saw research, analysis and dissemination of information as key activist strategies, viewed as liberatory and therefore as political" (Awumbila 2007a, 264). Over time, they increasingly engaged with development and governmental agencies, instrumentalizing their strategies in response to these agencies' efforts to include a gendered component to their initiatives (Awumbila 2007a, 2007b).

Women- and gender-focused research and teaching emerged during the 1980s and 1990s (Awumbila 2007a, 2007b), a period of crisis across Africa when the capacity to deliver quality education rooted in critical thinking was compromised by sparse resources (Zeelen 2012). This period coincides with a period of intense military rule throughout much of the region, as well as the imposition of structural adjustment programs that had devastating effects on many African economies and their public institutions (Mama 2006). Today, feminist scholarship in geography is represented in Ghanaian universities' undergraduate elective course offerings but has not infused the curriculum generally (Awumbila 2007a, 2007b). Courses include "Geography of Gender and Development in Africa" at UG and "Gender and Development" at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Research programs and centers, such as the Gender Programmes Unit at the University of Development Studies (UDS) and the Center for Gender Studies and Advocacy at UG provide further support for

education and scholarship, as well as supporting the translation of that research into social development efforts.

Access to scholarship

African researchers and their regional publications have struggled to gain visibility (Awumbila 2007a, 2007b; Pereira 2002). Scanning my own book- shelves, items acquired at UG's book- store, such as a lecture on "Ghana's Feminist Movement: Aspirations, Challenges, Achievements," (Prah 2007) and issues of the journal *Studies in Gender and Development in Africa* (SIGADA), published by the Gender Programmes Unit at UDS, have limited range of access to broader academic readership.

However, online access is shifting these circumstances (Ezema and Onyancha 2016). UG now hosts an online catalogue of materials published by its scholars, albeit with selective holdings of digital materials (<http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh>). Specific to geography, all current and back issues of *Ghana Journal of Geography* (GJG) are now available online (<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gig>) thanks to the work of the non-profit African Journals Online, a repository dedicated to disrupting the historical North to South and West to East flows of scholarly work by making African research broadly available. The same site also hosts SIGADA (its full two year run at <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sigada>). African feminist re- search is also made available through journals such as *Feminist Africa*, the region's first open access feminist studies journal (<http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/feminist-africa>).

Contributions to Scholarship

Feminist approaches have struggled to gain a significant foothold in African academic settings as institutions maintain a "male dominated intellectual culture" (Awumbila 2007b, 52). In- roads have been made, however. In the decade since Awumbila's reviews were published, efforts to incorporate analysis attuned to gender inequalities have been fruitful in geographic research in Ghana. A review of GJG shows that articles considering women, gender, and patriarchal structures have been included in more recent issues (Awumbila 2015; Hesselberg and Iverson 2011; Olawole 2017; Wrigley-Asante 2011, 2016; Wrigley-Asante et al. 2016; Ziblim, Yidana and Mohammed 2018). Although a small contingency, geographers in Ghana have actively developed research agendas that have contributed not only to understanding gender relations in the context of poverty, development, and inequalities in Ghana (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Wrigley-Asante 2016), but have also contributed more broadly to feminisms in Africa, working to challenge the assumptions of western feminisms, such as the tendency to take for granted local patriarchal structures and building place-specific understanding of oppression (Bawa 2018; see for instance Wrigley-Asante et al. 2016). Feminist geographical work in Ghana is most of- ten explicitly practical, highlighting the place-specific policy implications and making recommendations to interested parties within the development sector (see for example Awumbila 2015; Wrigley-Asante 2011).

Geographers working from outside of Ghana have likewise focused much of their work on critical considerations of development, examining, for example, gendered and generational livelihood experiences in urban and rural Ghana (Carr 2008; Chant and Jones 2005; Hanrahan 2015; Langevang and Gough 2009; Machado 2018; Oberhauser and Hanson 2007; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Porter et al 2011). They have also gained insight from the practices and structures of Ghanaian societies and have applied these insights in critique of dominant approaches within development studies. For instance, geographers have utilized place-specific knowledge of the construction of the division of labor to critique the dominance of the household and individual instrumentalized in livelihoods approaches (Hanrahan 2015), argued how HIV prevention campaigns reinforce normative care responsibilities that in- crease the burden of vulnerable citizens (Faria 2008), and challenged the use of binary constructions of gender as it relates to responsiveness to climate adaptation projects (Carr and Thompson 2014). Geographers within and beyond Ghana are contributing to feminist scholarship, documenting women's everyday lives, gender relations, and patriarchal structures, while contributing to efforts to theorize from this context.

Concluding Thoughts

A decade following reviews of gender and geography in Ghana, much remains the same—university programs offer undergraduate electives, but the curricular structure remains unaffected and gender inequities remain in the faculty and student bodies. Research that incorporates a gendered component is, however, increasingly represented and visible. In line with the development of gender-focused work more broadly in the region, much of this research continues to engage in development and policy-relevant research, documenting gendered inequalities, but also critiquing the sector. Feminists working as geographers in Ghana have built a small but significant space in which their students and other researchers can engage in understanding gendered inequalities and strategies for change and empowerment and researchers from outside of Ghana, myself included, have been fortunate to be able to work in Ghana and contribute to this scholarship. What is missing, however, is a fuller body of research that extends beyond development concerns—representing the social and cultural richness and depth engaged by feminist geographical work in other regions. Much like this body of work has pushed us towards critiques of assumptions in development, in moving forward, feminist geography in Ghana has the potential to push our geographical imaginations as it continues to build upon its foundations towards new social forms, much like the nation-building work that lies at its earliest foundations.

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