

Neoliberal feminism in Africa

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Is neoliberal feminism peculiarly suited to conditions
in some African countries?

In this article, I offer a critical reflection on neoliberal feminism in Africa, with a particular focus on Nigeria. I argue that neoliberal feminism is more likely to be embraced in Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, than some of the other kinds of feminism that are circulating there. This is because the high levels of poverty and unemployment in Nigeria, and the general lack of opportunities for access to financial empowerment, have fostered an individualised entrepreneurial mindset that is in some ways more in line with this kind feminism, problematic though that may be. I also reflect on the work of my organisation, African Women in Media, which seeks to mobilise women in media industries.

Becoming visible

African Women in Media campaigns for women to be more visible within the industry, and to be more supportive of each other, and this includes supporting women towards positions of leadership; and it also campaigns for women to take ownership of the way the content they produce represents women. One key theme of the group is visibility, and this was the subject of the 2018 African Women in Media conference, held at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Our focus at the conference was specifically on the media coverage of women in politics, and the kinds of visibility available to women running for office.

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One theme that emerged in relation to the practices of female journalists and women in politics was the importance of spaces and places. For example, Ijeoma Onyeator of Nigeria's Channels TV spoke of the environment of tension and violence that women reporters have to endure when they are working on election coverage, and the extent to which this affects their personal safety and ability to carry out their jobs - even assuming, of course, that their editor has been forward-thinking enough to not prevent them from doing their job due to their gender. I have used the term electoral spatial security as a way of discussing this and other experiences.¹

Another way in which the question of spatial security - and insecurity - operates is in its effects on the kinds of environments in which female candidates feel safe to speak. For example, Kenyan journalist Asha Mwilu, of Citizen TV, found that the female candidates she interviewed felt disempowered when they were interviewed in their own homes, because their authority in governance exists only outside of the home. Inside their homes, culturally pre-determined ideologies around gender roles become more pronounced. At home, a candidate is the wife of someone from whom permission must be sought to speak. Even within her own practice, Asha narrated instances when she had subconsciously relinquished her authority as an editor to the male editors in the room.

Online visibility for such women, whether as media practitioners or as subjects of media content, is also problematic: it has provided yet another space where anxiety about being insulted, or - worse still - one's husband being insulted, is heightened. Funke Treasure Durodola, assistant director of programmes for the Federal Radio Corporation Nigeria's Lagos division, pointed out that, for women, social media visibility can be empowering since it allows women to bypass traditional gatekeepers, but there is also a risk of disempowerment because of the disproportionately high levels of negative responses women receive. Professor Ojebode of the University of Ibadan found in his research that 41.8 per cent of female candidates felt that people were more likely to speak badly of them on social media, whereas only 25 per cent had the same expectation in relation to traditional media.

It is often asked why the #MeToo movement wasn't more popular in Africa. Is the lack of take up of this campaign another demonstration of difference, not just in people's lived experiences, but in how these experiences are nuanced? I would argue that, though there are many reasons for this relative silence, one factor is the high level of visibility of the #MeToo movement online and in the media.

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This raises for me a very important question: when we ask African women to adopt the individualised neoliberal feminist approach - taking ownership of their own empowerment, being entrepreneurial, negotiating their way through the peculiarities of their societies towards achieving self-empowerment - are we paying enough attention to the spaces and places in which they operate?

In considering this question of agency - of speaking, and the spaces where women feel empowered to speak - we might consider the work of postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak when she asked 'can the subaltern speak?'² Spivak's work was concerned with literature and language, and the ability of people from the former colonies to 'speak' in their adopted language, but I utilise this question in the context of the ability of African women to speak, both as media producers and as subjects of media content. Spivak's premise was that there is a difference between the subaltern actually having a voice and the appearance that they speaking. We might also consider Althusser's point that a philosophy should be judged not by whether it is correct or not, but by the effects it produces. If ideas seem self-evident to us, but are not being taken up, then we need to consider the reasons for this.

Through taking on board some of the points outlined above, we can identify opportunities for further research into the agency of African women in media; these include: their ability to speak; the ways in which their speaking can increase that agency; and the impact of spatial security on their speaking - whether of a physical or cultural nature. What is the impact/consequences of their being visible (speaking)?

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To answer this question in the context of neoliberal feminism in Africa, we might start first by understanding the requirements for the neoliberal feminist subject. These could be summarised as: she uses the resources available to her to foster her own empowerment, while still considering the best approach to achieving a work-life balance.³

Considered in the context of Nigerian culture around gender roles - which could, in turn, be summarised as 'higher levels of authority and respect are asked to remain in the workplace' - could this mean that neoliberal feminism, with its self-help rhetoric, presents an opportunity for feminism to be more accepted in a

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country like Nigeria? Can the model of an equilibrium between economic successes through achievement in one's career, while also having a personal life, turn out to be the spoon of sugar needed to make the feminist pill go down for those opposed to feminisms in Africa?

Feminism as it presents in Africa has been the subject of decades of academic discussion, much of which has been centred on defining African feminism. This has resulted in several scholars developing their own versions, including: Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism; Omolara Ogundipe Leslie's STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa); Alice Walker's Womanism; and Clenora Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism.⁴ Critics of African feminism(s) have argued that 'feminism' is un-African, and a Western idea that has been adopted as a result of colonisation. Others call for the interrogation of the use of the word 'Africa' and question what being 'African' really means. Simidele Dosekun, among others, has argued that, given that one cannot speak of an essential African identity or Africanness, how then can one argue that something is un-African?⁵

Many of the criticisms of African feminism(s) come from a similar mindset to that of the nationalist movements against colonialism, which sought to protect African traditions and cultural values: for them, feminism is divisive, diversionary and Western-inspired. This article takes the stance that African feminisms do exist, and that their/its definition should be based on the empirical study of the lived experiences of African women; it has no time for the postcolonial standpoint that rejects feminism and argues that it comes from the other. Do those advocating this position mean to argue that there were no struggles for gender equality before the colonialists came to Africa?

My argument is that it is precisely the self-actualisation rhetoric of neoliberal feminism that has the power to change those minds. This is because it doesn't promote a change to the society or culture, but to the individual's circumstance, in an economically empowering way. This might make sense in a country like Nigeria, where employment is low and poverty high, and entrepreneurship has become a de-facto way out.

Anything that supports and accelerates this self-made mindset, which empowers women to go out there and create opportunities for themselves, while still being able to balance their family life, should perhaps be seen as an opportunity to convert the unconverted. Neoliberal feminism doesn't challenge the cultural status

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quo: it speaks to the individual to empower herself. And if it is contextualised as a question of empowerment more generally, not just for women, it becomes difficult for men to justify holding their women back. The economic business case becomes an argument that they cannot challenge. In Nigeria, being in a position to say no to opportunities of economic prosperity is a luxury most cannot afford.

The negotiation of professional success with the proviso of maintaining a home is already the norm, and an example of the kinds of negotiations which Nnaemeka's nego-feminism speaks of.⁶ Is there room for neoliberal feminism and nego-feminism to co-exist? Nnaemeka argues that feminism in Africa seeks to challenge through collaboration, negotiation and compromise, in contrast to feminist scholarship in the West, which takes a more forceful approach: challenging, disrupting, deconstructing and blowing apart the status quo. Negotiating 'cultural spaces', she says, has helped women in Africa achieve their goals:

Here, negotiation has the double meaning of 'give and take/exchange' and 'cope with successfully/go around.' African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts (p378).

I propose that the expectations of the neoliberal feminist subject capture the types of negotiations African women already have to make: negotiations that take place within an economic logic, in an environment of high unemployment and limited opportunities for financial prosperity, and in a context that allows the maintaining of cultural expectations about the role of a woman at home, and presenting the subsequent financial benefit as one for the whole family.

A disempowering Trojan horse?

This could be described as a 'Trojan horse' approach to battling gender inequality, and it is undoubtedly the case that presenting this case to the beneficiaries of the

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status quo doesn't feel empowering - and it also loses us opportunities for a 'public feminist discussion'.⁷ Does the neoliberal-feminist disregard of the ways in which socioeconomics, politics and culture shape gender inequality make it a dangerous mindset to adopt in countries like Nigeria?

In many ways it is dangerous. Women in Nigeria are often forced to present their own wealth under the banner of their husband's wealth. Whilst she might in reality be the breadwinner, in order to negotiate the wider family and culture, the owner of the wealth is silenced in order for peace to remain at home, so that others don't ask who wears the trousers, or accuse her of bewitching her husband. When we look at some of the tweets under #BeingFemaleinNigeria - a social media campaign that went viral in 2015 - you see plenty of evidence of neoliberal nego-feminism. One woman described 'being the one that made all enrolment arrangement at your child's school and having 1st bill addressed to Mr Daniel'. There is no doubt that the 'discrete and isolated feminist consciousness' that Rottenberg speaks of exists in feminism in Africa under this nego-feminism banner.

However, I would take issue with Rottenberg's argument that neoliberal feminism does not facilitate collective uprising against gender inequality, and that it takes a solipsistic approach. I contend that the exchanges and documenting of these activities, and the how-to exchanges on social media, in books and other means, are in themselves forms of uprising. This activity is collective in that we are asking each person to work internally so that, externally, the number of internal uprisings is reflected in our numbers. But I do agree that this form of activism cannot avoid being discriminatory in terms of its membership.

I accept that this approach to change in society makes our goal an even longer-term prospect, but it will eventually come, through the number of participants in this silent uprising: the sheer numbers of those mobilised will be able to effect change when they reach the places they are aiming for. The journey to reach there is individual, but through the resultant number of participants change can then happen.

Will this approach take any longer to achieve its aims than those of other African feminisms? I think it is fair to say that the prospect of promoting feminist approaches in the context of economic prosperity better meets the conditions we face: there is already a collective militancy, even though it is one that is largely driven through individualism.

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The question of access

Having said all this, it has to be recognised that in order to have access to this neoliberal feminist mindset, one needs to have access to so many other things, all of which are hindered by multiple intersecting inequalities. In Nigeria, for example, obstacles to equality include the high unemployment rate (which reached an all-time high of 23.10 per cent in 2018), the large youth population (42.54 per cent are under the age of 14), and Nigeria's poor governance (it ranks 144/200 on Transparency International's corruption perception index). The gulf in access is much wider here than in the global north, and if neoliberal feminist subjects exist, they are certainly in the minority of the haves.

The poor economic and political conditions of the country mean that the entrepreneurial mindset has become the default *modus operandi*. Even if you do have formal employment, the culture of side-hustle is ingrained into the society. The pursuit of financial prosperity often takes precedence over advocacy - individual or collective - to overcome gendered inequalities. Working is not a choice but a necessity, and this means that being a woman is not generally a reason to stop you from working; it is more that the culture around gender roles, and the perception of who a woman should be, makes aspects of work-life a daily struggle. I recently posed a question about the gender pay gap in media organisations in the various African countries that make up the membership of African Women in Media, and was surprised at the consensus that the gender pay gap did not exist, in their experiences; far more urgent for them was the lack of representation of women in leadership positions.

So in Nigeria this neoliberal feminist who wants to own her own process of liberation comes as a sink-or-swim necessity. The issue here, I suppose, when we consider the gulf between the haves and have-nots in countries like Nigeria, is that this neoliberal feminist subject will either be viewed as inspirational by those that do not have the financial means to liberate themselves, or will be rejected as someone who does not relate with the realities of the vast majority of people. And one might also suggest that it is dangerous to promote a neoliberal feminist ideology in an environment where governmental culture already disavows democratic responsibility for its people.

On the other hand, in countries like Nigeria where the government seems to

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be so far behind in their thinking, and unwilling to address gender inequality, the solution of neoliberal feminism manifests itself in other spheres. Entrepreneurship as an outcome of scarcity of jobs, and the lack of adequate support from the state, means that neoliberal feminism is the main option in Nigeria, even though this has the danger of leading to another level of gender inequality, because of the gulf between the haves and have-nots.

This is an example of what Rottenberg meant when she wrote that neoliberalism is 'a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors' (p420).

But there is also a question about how we define the nature of neoliberal feminism. When does one become a neoliberal feminist? Does it depend on making a judgement about the level of wealth you gain from your neoliberalist activities, your-side hustles, or is the mere fact that you are trying to be self-made enough to define you as a neoliberal feminist subject? According to Tinuke Fapohunda, 60 per cent of the potential working population in Nigeria work in the informal economy, and the women working in this environment are vital to its ecosystem. In the global south, informal economies have the potential to contribute 41 per cent of their country's GDP, according to the World Bank. And UNWomen found that 89 per cent of women in employment in sub-Saharan Africa partake in informal economies.⁹ Does participation in the informal economy qualify or disqualify this majority from being accepted as examples of neoliberal feminism at play?

If we are to understand neoliberalism as the promotion of individualised self-empowerment, and neoliberal governmentality as promoting this way of doing things, then the economic conditions in Nigeria enforce a neoliberal culture of entrepreneurship: its adoption is not a question of intention. When we connect this recognition to the issue of feminism, there is a lot more to consider than citizens as entrepreneurial actors: the question becomes, rather, about how feminist subjects are using this mentality to address gender inequality. How are entrepreneurial women using this ideology to get themselves into leadership positions? How are men who are feminists responding to the poor governance, and actively using a neoliberal approach to getting women into spaces from which they might otherwise be excluded?

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Market feminism

African Women in Media is a relatively new organisation. It was formally registered in Nigeria in 2018, though it has existed as a Facebook group since 2016. It has a website - www.africanwomeninmedia.com - and a newsletter, and convenes at an annual and touring conference. Its membership, existing mainly on our closed Facebook group, comes from across the world, cutting across media industries, but with a majority being in news media. The conversations in this Facebook-enabled space have, to an extent, organically developed in such a way that it has become an environment focused on career and professional development. Opportunities are shared, professional help and advice is sought, and moderators come from within the group and not admin.

Over the three years, we have had conversations about its membership criteria, particularly on how we define African women: continental African, diaspora African, of African heritage and of African nationality. We have recently opted to maintain the Facebook group as a women-only space, but conversations are still ongoing as to whether we permit membership outside of our wide definition of 'African women', to allow supporters whose work is largely Africa-facing and in support of women in media on the continent. AWiM is for all women of African descent or nationality (irrespective of race) within any media industry anywhere in the world. Our challenges, grievances, opportunities and strengths may differ in certain instances, but through the adoption of 'strategic essentialism', the AWiM umbrella permits us the opportunity to work together in the reconstruction of our realities, and to have a positive impact on the way in which media functions in relation to African women.¹⁰

While there are merits to remaining solely as a Facebook group, we are now moving towards the establishment of a freemium modelled subscription via our website (as opposed to an association type subscription). This is to assist us in building on the outcomes of our annual event and the conversations on Facebook. Our decision to venture into the frame of 'market feminism', in terms of looking to private corporate funding to support our activities - namely our annual conference - was adopted in order to enable us to expand our scale of operation. We have not gone for the NGO fundraising approach, in part because of the growing fatigue with NGOs.¹¹

There are, however, examples of successful organisations solely working as

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Facebook groups, including Female IN (formerly Female in Nigeria, and also known as FIN), which was founded by Lola Omolola. Women in groups like FIN are manifesting their agency through social media by using the platforms to create environments in which they can share stories and support each other. The digital public sphere occupied by the voices of African women operates through self-determination, and the organising efforts of those at home and in the diaspora; and it has a supportive women's rights activism at its core.

One could argue that state and market feminism collide in the ways AWiM constructs its conferences, because the objective is to have an impact on policy through the development of a collective consciousness among our members - one that calls on them individually to take ownership of their employment. So through AWiM we ask individuals to take ownership - but to do so within the spectrum of a collective movement. We are market-driven organisationally, in our structure and source of funds - AWiM is not an NGO nor a social enterprise - but we have social objectives and aim to impact policy.

I define my own positionality as someone occupying both the academic and practice spaces, and needing the exchange of knowledge that this provides. My epistemological agenda is to develop intellectual debates around defining African feminism through the lived experiences of African women; and to focus my own intellectual body of work on the lived experiences of African women in media industries. I have set out to have a positive impact on the production, consumption and distribution of media in relation to women. But to do that, while at many a time feeling awash with impostor syndrome, I personally need to be breaking some glass ceilings - or, to quote George Sand a century ago, 'une voûte de cristal impénétrable' [an impenetrable crystal vault].

Conclusion

A neoliberal feminist perspective in African contexts might prove empowering for those able to access it; and it may be useful in the negotiation between economic empowerment and not disrupting cultural perspectives on womanhood; but, being mindful of the intersecting complexities of gender inequality, and the gulf in progress still needed in countries like Nigeria, I would be cautious. The uneven landscape dictated by social class means that, for a majority of women, negotiating

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an individualised form of feminism is a non-starter. According to UNICEF, 37 per cent of women aged 15-24 in Nigeria cannot read.¹² And as jihadist militancy rips through northeast Nigeria, the prospects are even worse for girls and women in that region. UNICEF reports 2.8 million children in need of 'education-in-emergencies support' in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states.

That being said, I wonder if we can interpret the culture of entrepreneurialism - the activities and central role of women in informal economies for example, seen as a result of poor governance - as a specific form of neoliberal feminist activity.

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Notes

1. Yemisi Akinbobola, 'Event review: African Women in Media Conference 2018', *Communication Cultures*, Vol 1 No 1, 2018.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana/Chicago 1988.
3. Catherine Rottenberg, 'The rise of neoliberal feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 28, 3, 2014.
4. O. Nnaemeka, 'Nego Feminism: theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way', *Development Cultures: New Environments, New Realities, New Strategies. Special Issue*, Vol 29, No 2, 2004; Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves*, Africa World Press, Trenton 1994; Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1983; Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana womanism: reclaiming ourselves*, Bedford Publishers, Troy, Mich, 1993.
5. Simidele Dosekun, 'Defending Feminism in Africa', postamble 3, 1, 2007.
6. Nnaemeka, op cit. Nnaemeka argues for an approach based on negotiation; 'nego' also refers to 'no ego'.
7. Rottenberg, op cit, p426.
8. Tinuke Fapohunda, 'Women and the informal sector in Nigeria: implications for development', *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol 4 No 1, 2012.

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9. UNWomen, *Women in the changing world of work*, 2017: <http://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html>.

10. For strategic essentialism see Spivack, op cit.

11. For market feminism see J. Kantola and J. Squires, 'From state feminism to market feminism?', *International Political Science Review*, 33, 4, 2012; doi: 10.1177/0192512111432513.

12. UNICEF, *Literacy among young women: Nigeria*, 2017: <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media/1631/file>.