

In Conversation: *"The Room For Questioning is Huge":*

Jane Bennett speaks with Charmaine Pereira

Charmaine Pereira has been the Director of the Nigerian Initiative for Women's Studies since 2005, and has worked as an African feminist researcher, advocacy and policy designer, and organizational leader throughout her life. She is responsible (with other members of the Initiative) for research and networking projects around issues of citizenship, policy, higher educational institutional culture, and sexuality. She is the author of numerous papers and journal articles, some of which have appeared in *Feminist Africa* (see issues 1, 2 and 5), and has worked with many different research and activist organizations on the continent, including the African Gender Institute. Her most recent book **Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System**¹ was reviewed in *Feminist Africa* 9.

Jane Bennett (JB): We've been working together for a while, teaching on the African Gender Institute's intensive seminar programme for researchers who want to take issues of gender and sexualities seriously. In one of our last seminar sessions, Funmi Bammeke, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Lagos, asked you to talk a little bit about your own history as a "feminist researcher activist", and you responded with a powerful narrative of cross-country, cross-disciplinary, personal and political work. Would you mind telling us that story again?

Charmaine Pereira (CP): At the time I began my doctoral research on teachers in day nurseries in the UK, I was not a feminist. I became a feminist towards the end of the research, in the mid 1980s, and then had to grapple with wishing that I'd done things differently, asked different questions and so on.

I think this sort of self-questioning is likely to happen anyway, after a period of research training and with the benefit of hindsight, but "reading"

my work through feminist eyes accentuated the distance between the questions I had originally posed and those that subsequently caught my interest. My research was on efforts in the UK to try and bring together day care and education for children under five by introducing teachers into day nurseries. Although day nurseries were initially set up to provide care for the children of working mothers (not their fathers!), after the Second World War reasons were being sought to reduce the numbers of such nurseries and limit their intake. So they began to cater mainly for the children of single parents or from families who were considered “at risk” in some way. The staff in day nurseries had training backgrounds in health and welfare, unlike teachers in nursery schools whose training was in education. A number of local authorities in England were concerned with the lack of educational input in the lives of under fives in day nurseries and so they started employing teachers to work part-time in the nurseries. The assumption was that teachers would make a difference to the children because they would provide “education”, as opposed to the “care” that nursery officers provided. However, teachers also worked in smaller groups with the children and for shorter periods of time. In my research, I compared the interactions and conversations that teachers had with these small groups of children with those of nursery officers. I also spent hours observing children’s play and interactions, with a view to making statements about the relative levels of children’s social development, in nurseries that employed teachers as well as those that did not. Although it got really tedious towards the end, it was quite interesting observing the children, paying attention to language and behaviour, and learning about the shifts and turns in policy in this field.

All this I found useful even when later, I started working on quite different terrain. When I moved to Nigeria and started teaching at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), I was in the sociology department which meant a shift in disciplinary base since my background was in psychology. I started teaching courses like “Women in Society” and “Family in a Changing World”, which got me more directly involved in the arena of Women’s Studies at ABU, although the courses were not presented as such in the department.

JB: That’s so interesting! I didn’t know you began your “research life” in early education. How did you get the ideas and interest for the “Women in Society” course?

CP: Even before I had started teaching at ABU, I was invited to take part in collective research on the practice of Muslim laws in Nigeria, under the

auspices of the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws. I learned a lot through this experience – about doing feminist research in this field, about the society in which I was now living and the significance of identity politics and religion, and about doing collective action research.

Through my teaching at ABU, I learned first-hand about the challenges of trying to stay intellectually alive in a university context that was eroded in many ways. I learned about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, particularly for female students. And the feeling of combined rage and powerlessness that I had about being unable to change the situation stayed with me for a long time.

JB: Were there other women faculty with the same sense of frustration?

CP: Even when Women in Nigeria was alive and well organised on campus in the 1980s, the women who tried to do something about sexual harassment and sexual violence in the university found it very difficult to address the situation. By the 1990s, although WIN still existed at ABU, it was no longer marked by the feminist politics of its predecessors and I did not see it taking forward any serious effort to change the status quo. It was my experience of being unable to change things then that informed my determination in later years that a more concerted effort should be made to challenge sexual harassment in universities. For me, becoming a feminist researcher and activist has been an ongoing process, one in which the trajectory has not been predictable or marked by continuing in an apparently unilinear direction for a long period of time. That probably reflects my own tendency to want to take on new ideas and challenges, and then I have to balance these with existing commitments. What I think is important in this process is trying to keep an open mind whilst being willing to ask questions about power – who uses it, in what ways, with what effects and how women figure in all of this – in the research process as well as in drawing on research for activism.

JB: I'd be interested in hearing more about your sense of how a "feminist" WIN changed into something different (and I know a lot has actually been written about WIN) but let me move into another area. Many feminists in the North speak of the "tension" between research and activism – in African contexts, my own experience has been that while tensions do exist, they don't usually lead to the possibility of "academic researchers" complete segregation from the mess and difficulties of local political activism. What is your sense of this?

CP: I agree with you. I think many "academic" researchers i.e. researchers based in universities, have some connection with activism, or are at least aware of

different initiatives but it's by no means the case across the board. I remember at the second Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria workshop on Concepts and Methods for Gender and Women's Studies, quite a few of the academics present wanted to know more about existing forms of activism, how they could form links with activists and make connections between their work and research. This shows that the academics were not very much involved in activism themselves and felt some kind of disconnect with that sphere. This may be a more recent phenomenon concerning "academic" researchers of the 1990s. My sense is that the researchers who were "academics" in the 1980s, or who left universities in the 1990s, have tended to be concerned about legacies of imperialism and the continued exploitation of African societies; their involvement in activism has generally been fuelled by a sense of wanting to use their knowledge to make a difference and this often means being inserted into networks of activists in the process. So they may be called upon by activists at different times and in different ways – to attend workshops, or participate in projects at different levels, or mobilise around particular issues and so on. African universities have generally not been ivory towers as in the North, but spaces for developing leaders for the nation.

In addition to that, research and writing that has a bearing on social relations is rarely so specialised in our contexts that it can be carried out without some reference to what is currently going on in the society. So African academics in general, women and men, have been expected to engage in some kind of community, if not political, service. Women in Nigeria, an organisation aimed at carrying out research to understand the conditions of women's lives and using this knowledge to mobilise women and men to change unequal power relations in society, had its inaugural meeting in 1982 at ABU, in Zaria. So *how* you think of knowledge and *why* it is important – these are critical dimensions of the connections or tensions between research and activism.

JB: You yourself have conducted research in many different ways – as part of research networks, as an individual scholar, as someone working with donor-funded projects, as the strategic director of a network. How have these different positions impacted on the meaning of "strategic feminist research" for you?

CP: I think of "strategic feminist research" as research that advances feminist knowledge and understanding of a particular issue to the extent that one is in a position to decide which strategies are appropriate for bringing about particular kinds of change. This would be change that furthers a feminist vision of relations among peoples and nations. Strategic feminist research

is ultimately tied to advancing the use of appropriate strategies, but for me this is not about strategies divorced from theory. In fact, I see the theory as critical to refining feminist understanding of what the issues are and what needs to change. Without that deep understanding, any choice of strategies is likely to be flawed. Now how you link the capacity to do that kind of research and the different positions from which one may conduct research, is not a straightforward question! I would say that the ability to do strategic feminist research has a lot to do with the nature of your research question, which is shaped largely by your politics, and the autonomy with which you can pursue that question. Having sufficient funds to carry out the research helps – in fact, it helps a lot – but it is not in itself a prime determinant of the ability to ask a feminist question.

I think the main way in which the different positions I've occupied as a researcher have affected the character of the research has been in terms of the scope of the research. For example, the research projects I co-ordinate at IWSN are the only national level studies I've worked on and that reflects the fact that there are a number of researchers involved from different parts of the country. However, this didn't just happen – it took quite a lot of effort to raise the funds for the questions that we wanted to ask, as opposed to us working on priorities determined by funders. As co-ordinator I have some degree of control over the conceptualising of the project and certain methodological issues, such as how the research questions might be interpreted and what kinds of methods may be taken up but I am also dependent ultimately on the researchers who are actually doing the research. When working as an individual scholar or as a member of a research network, you are not dependent on others doing the research and you may also work with your own agenda, but the responsibilities are different and you are responded to differently by people you may want to influence with your research.

JB: Please tell us about IWSN – the origins of the network, its approach to research as a political space for “women’s studies”, its challenges.

CP: The network began at a workshop in January 1996 in Kaduna, convened by Amina Mama. It brought together women, and a few men, who were working in some way on gender and women’s studies in different disciplines and from different universities across the country. The aim was to map the intellectual resources available for gender and women’s studies in Nigeria and to collectively set an agenda for teaching and research in the field. At that workshop, participants agreed to form a national network, to be known as the

Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria (NWSN). Given that most people were working in isolation, often in environments that were quite hostile to gender and women's studies, we felt it was important to maintain a forum for engaging with others working in the field and to develop ourselves in the process. We chose "women's studies" quite consciously, because whilst we appreciated the significance of gender relations in women's lives, we wanted to put the emphasis on "women" as taking the lead in analysing and studying women's lives.

Through the British Council, NWSN was involved in an innovative three-way higher education link programme with ABU and Liverpool University. This was very useful since exchange visits were part of the programme and we were able to acquire documentation for a resource centre at ABU, and material for study packs for participants at NWSN training workshops. Amina was the NWSN co-ordinator and I co-ordinated the ABU arm of the programme. We held three training workshops subsequently: a second one later that year on Concepts and Methods, one in 1997 on Curriculum and the third in 1998, on Policy. Shortly after that, Amina left for the AGI and our existing funding from the British Council came to an end. I had been nominated Co-ordinator at the 1998 workshop, in view of Amina's imminent departure.

For a long time after that, I struggled with fund raising – none of the donors in Nigeria that I approached were interested in funding what we wanted to do. It was a very difficult time; there was no money for anything. The break came in 2002, when I was able to get funding from the British Council for our next workshop, on the Gender Politics of Violence. Meanwhile, I had just completed a study of gender and the university system as part of a research network convened by the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, and had been approached by Carnegie at the end of that research about the possibility of taking the work on gender further. I thought that this would be a good opportunity to do some research on sexual harassment through NWSN, as opposed to doing it as an individual. Anyway, our 2002 workshop allowed us some space to plan a collective research project on sexual harassment. Carnegie subsequently decided not to fund the research but eventually, with support from Lennart Wolgemuth, the former director of the Nordic Africa Institute, we were able to get funding from SIDA, Stockholm. This made it possible for NWSN to open an office in Abuja in 2005.

JB: That's quite an amazing journey, of perseverance and passion! I remember seeing your first office in 2005, and thinking what a feat it was that had been accomplished.

CP: Well, did you know that when registering the organisation, we had to change the name because the Corporate Affairs Commission did not like the word “network”, just like they didn’t like words such as “coalition”, “democracy” – anything that suggested people might want to organise or run their own affairs. So we renamed ourselves the Initiative for Women’s Studies in Nigeria (IWSN).

Our second main project is on women’s citizenship in practice, and that began by IDRC approaching me after I’d given a paper on that theme at a CODESRIA meeting. They were interested in supporting research on women’s citizenship and again, I thought it would be good to do this through IWSN. The project began last year. We have a smaller project ongoing on women’s empowerment, which began with the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy at the University of Ghana approaching me to work on this theme as part of a group based in West Africa. The West African researchers are part of a wider, international consortium co-ordinated by Andrea Cornwall at the Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex.

JB: What sort of approach did IWSN take to strengthening research capacity for feminist work?

CP: In its early years, IWSN began with a model of capacity building based on annual 3-day training workshops. What we have today is a much more intensive engagement with action research carried out collectively. The researchers involved are selected on the basis of having some knowledge, if not experience, in the area; they are IWSN members; and come from different parts of the country. The process provides researchers and their assistants with greater access to research materials, support in conceptual and methodological development and at the end of the day, assuming the research is successfully completed, intellectual resources for all of us which would be useful for teaching and further research. It’s very challenging doing capacity building this way – it takes a lot of energy and effort to maintain contact with researchers and try to keep the idea of the research alive in their minds, given the anti-intellectual environments that most universities in Nigeria have largely become. Many of the researchers have heavy teaching requirements, those who get promoted have huge administrative workloads, and some are very busy with consultancies. Health problems abound, which is not surprising given the stress that researchers are under, since they generally have familial and community responsibilities on top of everything else. I often feel I’m treading a fine line trying to be sensitive to all the demands they currently

face, whilst adding IWSN's own demands to get the research done, and done well!

JB: Done well... I know what you mean. Sometimes, for me, "done well" gets to be just "done," under some of the circumstances researchers can face. If you had to choose, which of IWSN's projects strikes you as the most successful? Was there any project work which left you disappointed, and why?

CP: It's not possible to compare the projects in terms of their relative success – they started at different times and are at different levels of completion. I think they are all exciting in different ways, but also quite demanding.

One of the main challenges has been encouraging researchers to think more creatively, outside the existing restrictive frameworks and across disciplinary boundaries. I think there's a gendered dimension to this – in order to think more freely you have to be prepared to "break the rules" sometimes, and this is precisely what girls and women are taught *not* to do, especially in societies where women are expected to be "respectable". It's not something that I find that hard to do, thinking outside of the box, that is, and I think I expect the researchers I'm working with to do the same so it is sometimes disappointing when I find that this is not always the case. It just means one has to work harder to do innovative research.

JB: Well, for me it's always been a total pleasure working with you and your "out of the box" thinking – I've learned a huge amount from working with you as a teacher, and from interacting with your approaches to the sexual harassment research process IWSN undertook. What are the most exciting spaces, for you, right now in working as a feminist researcher and activist?

CP: I'm really interested in finding out more about women's lives, bearing in mind the diversities in Nigeria and how little is documented and analysed concerning women's experiences. What I find exciting is using approaches that are intrinsically interesting in themselves, like life stories, to open up the conceptualisation of issues like citizenship, which are not often addressed using such methods. I like making connections between areas of thought that are not normally seen as relevant to each other.

I'm also fascinated by questions of meaning and representation, like how do we know what anybody ever means when they say something? Or when someone else says what a particular woman or group of women are supposed to have said or done, like when the male-dominated media report on women. Issues of meaning and representation come up in any case in a multilingual context, where the official language is a colonial language that most people

don't normally use at home. It's particularly relevant when the subject of discussion is sexuality, which is not generally spoken about in straightforward terms anyway. So when women are demonised on sexual grounds and they become the subject of public debate, even when there is uncertainty about what the woman has been said to do or not to do, people often take up moralising positions concerning the woman that become very polarised and absolute. And yet the room for questioning is huge, given the character of language and of sexuality. I find these sorts of issues really compelling to research from a feminist perspective.

And perhaps the most exciting for me is being able to show that *how you think* is crucial for *what you do*, whether in terms of choice of strategy as a feminist or countering some powerful official's notion of what should be done. The most recent example of this was the public hearing in the National Assembly on Senator Ekaette's bill on Public Nudity, Sexual Intimidation and Other Related Matters. The bill aims to criminalise "indecent dressing" and it tries to do so by labelling it "nudity". Whilst this seems incredible, it's amazing how many people think in ways similar to the Senator. So arguing against such a ridiculous piece of legislation is not as straightforward as it might seem. But women strategised and mobilised, and the National Assembly had never seen as many women in one place under its roof, and even some outside, as on that day. The Senate was left in no doubt as to women's utter rejection of the bill.

What I found exciting, apart from the actual mobilising, was thinking about how to unravel the justification for the legislation with strong arguments that refuted the *sponsor's* position, as opposed to simply making arguments based on the priorities that *activists* think are important in terms of advancing an agenda for women. This particular struggle is not over yet, we need to be vigilant in terms of what happens next with the bill.

JB: Wow, please keep me updated about that one – there have been very strong popular expressions around policing women's dress in South Africa lately – women getting attacked for wearing short skirts or skimpy tops – and it is interesting to watch how these concerns "spark out" across our different contexts. You travel widely within Africa; what is your sense of the ways in which different national and political spaces impact upon what can be undertaken as "feminist research" – as activism – continentally?

CP: I think the fact that different national contexts in Africa have their own particular histories and politics means that the issues of concern to women

are configured differently in these various locations. Differing regulatory frameworks shape the ideological bases for many struggles for access and control. The outcomes of these struggles have a bearing on women's access to land and other resources as well as determining the contours of what is considered "normal", such as whether same sex relations are criminalised or not, as they are in most African countries. The terrain on which women organise to change the status quo also varies in different contexts. So for example, the practice of Muslim laws is much more salient for women in North and West Africa than it is for Central and Southern Africa, except to some extent for South Africa. At the same time, some issues are common across the continent and beyond, like violence against women. Here too though, there are some forms of woman abuse that might be specific to certain locations and not others. So I believe that any effort to undertake feminist research continentally has to contextualise the significance of the research in any given national space and be sensitive to the commonalities as well as the specificities of that question across national contexts.

JB: Last one – what do you wish someone had told you about becoming a feminist researcher?

CP: This is a very interesting question. In terms of doing feminist research, I wish I'd heard more accounts of the nitty-gritty, can't-figure-out-what-I'm-doing-and-why aspects of feminist research, especially early on. I used to worry a lot about "theory", not "feminist theory" in particular but "theory" in general – what exactly it was and how to produce it. I would have loved to have had "theory" demystified a long time ago. I think it's fascinating to hear about how different women came to live their feminism, what the turning points in their lives were and how this informed the research questions they ultimately pursued. I would have liked to have heard more about how other women had become feminist researchers, what trajectories their lives had taken and what was significant to them about the research they had done, and not done. That would have been not only been very interesting but useful too, in terms of seeing how they had dealt with the various challenges in their lives and what I could learn from that. I'm not sure that I can think of any abstracted "lessons" that I wished someone had told me about – I'm more interested in the detail and why that is important in the context of a person's life.

JB: Charmaine, thank you so much; you're right – the power of the detail to illuminate the political dynamics at play around a space, or a body, or a

collective, is fascinating, but what you have reminded me of here is how it can take a lifetime to discern that power – to be “happy” as a researcher with “details” in a world which still forces upon us broad sketches of experience as “dominant reality”. I’ve learned a lot from listening to you here (again). Travel safely.

Endnotes

1. Pereira, C. (2007) *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System*. Oxford: James Currey; Ibadan: Heineman Educational Books

