

# The unfolding of African feminism in CODESRIA

Rethinking the dynamics of knowledge  
commons



# What does this picture mean?

Geography of reason: scholarship from the north is excellent in virtue of its intellectual and geographic location. (Lewis Gordon)

Epistemic dependence: the attainment of scholarly excellence in the African academy involves the attainment of the proper understanding that African scholarship is fundamentally derivative of and dependent on northern scholarship. (Paulin Hountondji)

# Who are CODESRIA?

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa is a pan-African community of scholars.

They first came together in 1964 to foster greater collaboration between African scholars. They act as a pan-African forum for critiquing and creating intellectual work, and train and support scholars across the continent.

All their intellectual work is freely available and can be accessed in Arabic, French, English and Portuguese.

CODESRIA is “the first major pan-African organisation to be established and to operate on a purely voluntary basis outside the inter-governmental and international systems. It was a pioneering organisation in an untried territory.” (Abdalla Bujra)

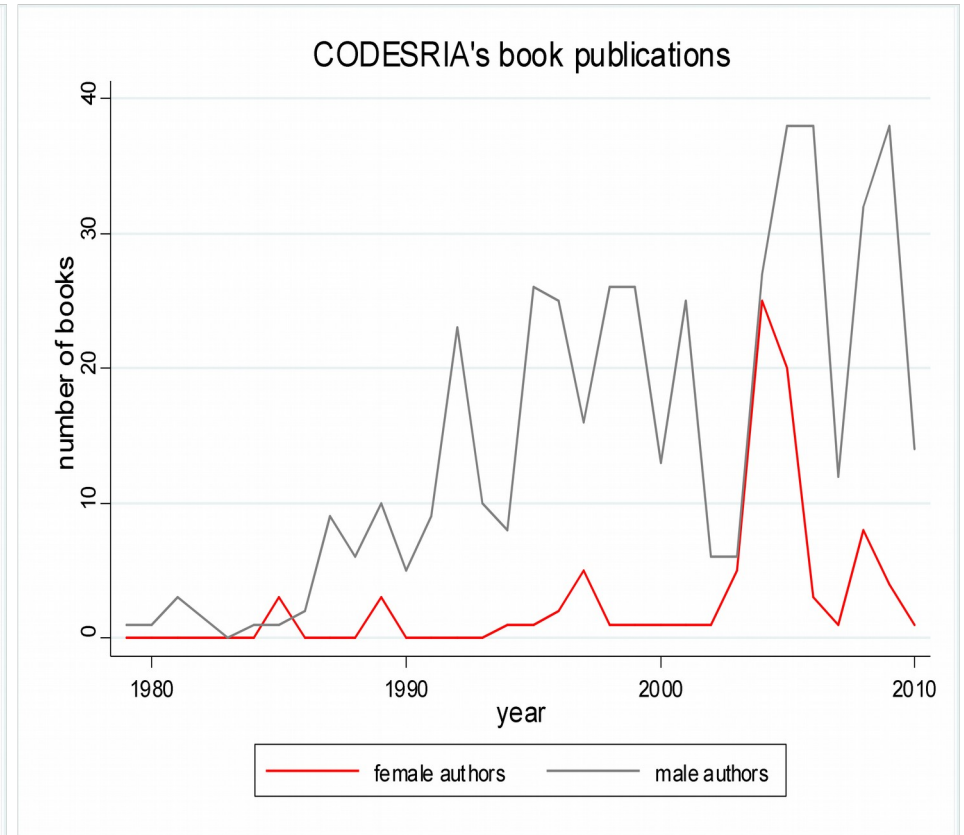
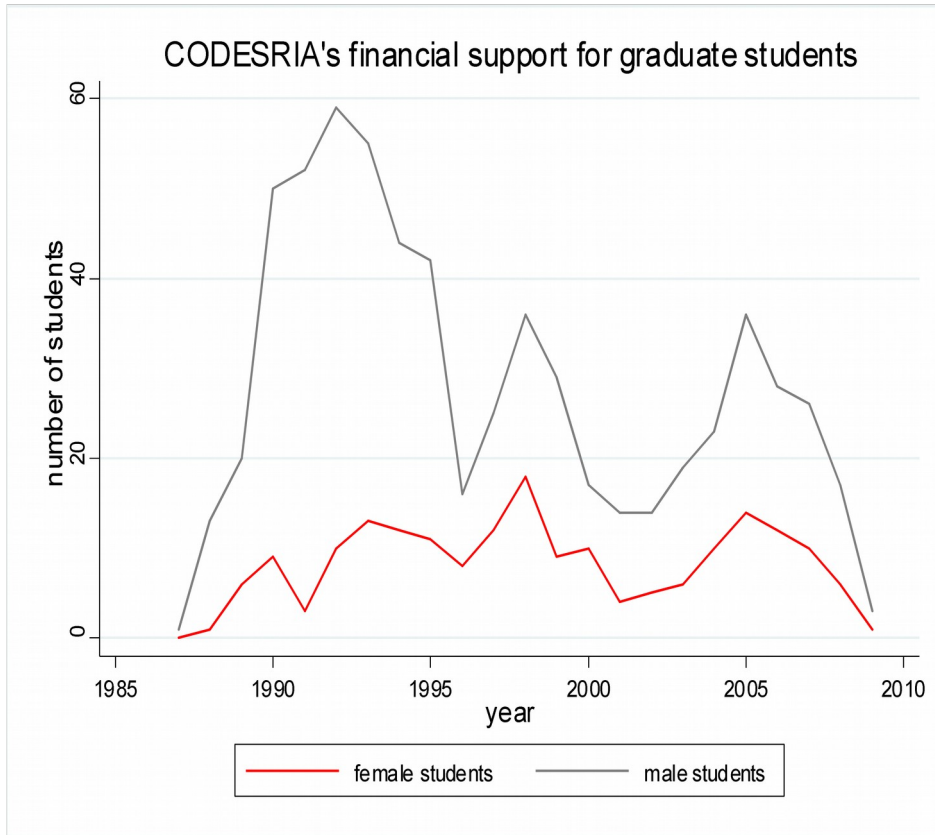
# This looks like a knowledge commons

- A knowledge commons is a system in which intellectual goods are managed and produced by a community through collective action and self-governance
- This theoretical perspective seeks to understand how systems become path dependent, and how a community can act collectively to change this path dependency

	Privately owned	Not privately owned
Managed by community	Club goods (Learned societies)	<b>Common goods</b> (Wikipedia Human Genome Project)
Not managed by community	Private goods (Thomson Reuters)	Public goods (Public university)



# But inequality can also exist in the commons



# Hostility towards women's thought

Male scholars have often responded to African feminism by denouncing it as “**rampant imperialism** ... African women intellectuals ... are the targets of sharpest criticism ... few of them dare to claim inspiration from feminism for fear of being treated as non-African, uprooted, bourgeois, or worse – lesbian.” (Fatou Sow)

The **sexual politics of feminism** have “provoked strong reactions and united men against it across the ideological spectrum, allowing gender issues to be discredited or refuted on spurious grounds. On this issue male traditionalists, Islamic fundamentalists, nationalist and radicals of all shades could make common cause.” (Eboe Hutchful)

The charge of being Western-dominated “is most often levelled at women, because of the association with **women as bearers of culture**,” but “contemporary feminist theories are considerably less White and Western dominated than many other social science paradigms, precisely because of the force and effectiveness of the critiques of African, Asian, Caribbean, Latin American and Pacific women.” (Ayesha Imam)

# The role of collective action

Feminist scholars first intervene in a CODESRIA conferences in 1985, but this intervention is not recorded in the archive – it is disappeared from its institutional memory

Feminist scholars then collectively pressurise CODESRIA for a gender workshop in 1991. This results in the first journal publications on gender and changes the archive to recognise earlier feminist interventions

By 1998, they get representation in the Scientific Committee, but not its governance structures (where the real power is thought to lie). A “feminist strategy [of] quiet encroachments, multiple strategies, multiple locations.” (Amina Mama)

Through the Scientific Committee, they compel CODESRIA to commit to an annual gender institute, a gender book series, and the development of annotated bibliographies on African feminist scholarship. They also change the politics of representation & by 2003 CODESRIA elects Zenebework Tadesse, its first female president



# The intellectual fruits of collective action

## False universalism

**Northern feminism:** This false universalism “restricts the ways in which African social researchers are able to think and theorize. We are forced to take on board these norms and waste time tilting at windmills to find out why we deviate from these patterns instead of finding out what our own patterns and realities are.” (Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama)

## False particularism

**Africanist scholarship:** In revolting against Western ethnocentric false universalisations, we should be careful not to enshrine in their place equally false essentialisations of Africanity, which disenfranchise us from examining certain aspects of oppressive relations” (Paul Zeleza)

## Holism of understanding

To work towards the universal from careful and deep engagement with multiple particular perspectives. This means understanding is a collective enterprise & should be judged by how well an intellectual community makes sense of, and troubles, their social world: “This is not to say all points of [our] approach are uniquely peculiar to African scholars, but it is they (we) with whom I am concerned here.”(Ayesha Imam)

# This suggests new standards of excellence

## Colonial standards

Geography of reason: scholarship from the north is excellent in virtue of its intellectual and geographic location. (Lewis Gordon 2002)

Epistemic dependence: the attainment of scholarly excellence in the African academy involves the attainment of the proper understanding that African scholarship is fundamentally derivative of and dependent on northern scholarship. (Paulin Hountondji 1990)

## African feminist standards

The question of geography is irrelevant to considerations of scholastic excellence

Excellence is the function of a community rather than the attribute of a place.

These standards promote greater collaboration among African scholars, and thereby foster a more cohesive, cumulative and autonomous knowledge system.

# Rethinking knowledge as a commons

The collective action of marginalised members can compel dominant members to recognise their reason. This can lead to new intellectual and organisational institutions (or rules). This tells us that contestations over inequality within the commons can be a source of intellectual and organisational renewal. If so, the collective agency of marginalised individuals is central to the flourishing of knowledge commons

# Back-up slides

# This is a struggle over reason

“When I opened this conference a few days ago I confidently, or rather foolhardily, stated: 'I am not convinced there is a corpus of methodologies, approaches or empirical studies based on gender analysis awaiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community. Much work needs to be done.'

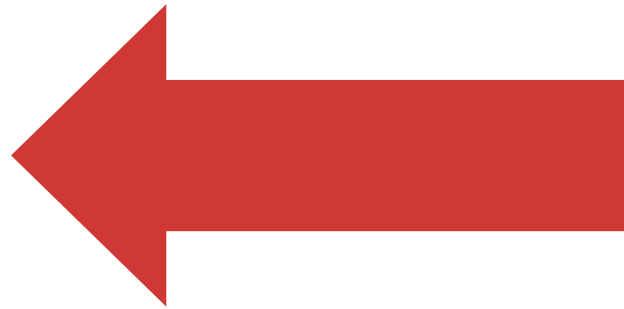
After listening to the discussions in the last four days and after reading some of the papers presented here I am convinced that my remarks were as good a case of the total triumph of ignorance over intellectual humility and open-mindedness as there ever was.

I would therefore like to rephrase my remarks as follows: I am now convinced there is a corpus of methodologies, approaches or empirical studies based on gender analysis awaiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community. I do, however, maintain much work needs to be done.” (Thandika Mkandawire 1991)

# How did this contestation emerge?



External factors:  
Structural adjustment  
UN Women's Decade



Internal factors:  
Collective action  
Collective reflection



# The role of external factors

Women's autonomous organising became a key battleground on which structural adjustment was waged. The gendered impacts of adjustment contributed to the decline of women's autonomous organisations. This pushed feminist scholars towards CODESRIA.

“The UN decade started in started in 1985. We had ten years of women's discourses around the world. Even African governments actually realised that women were sitting there and had their agenda. Even if they mis-applied the agenda, they took the wording, but they didn't do the politics. Even the time was *a propis* ... it was the time, it was in the air.”  
(Fatou Sow 2016)

# The intellectual fruits of this struggle

To survive, feminist scholars in CODESRIA could not work in isolation from each other. They had to develop an institutional framework that enabled them to act as a pan-African intellectual community

This meant that they addressed their work to other African scholars, rather than the spectre of the West – they refused to waste their time “tilting at windmills” (Imam, 1994)

This was strengthened by their commitment to being deeply embedded in and responsive to their contexts, such that they actively attempted to cultivate a historical imagination

# What counts as African intellectual work?

This question is often characterised by the conviction that the geographical origin of ideas matters a great deal to whether intellectual work counts as African.

But the work of feminist scholars in CODESRIA suggests ideas are like water: they do not always obey the boundaries of political or cultural constructs.

Instead, their work suggests that we should look to the structure of an intellectual community to understand its identity.