

# **ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN WOMEN FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT - AAWORD**

**AAWORD AT THIRTY: CHARTING THE FUTURE  
BAINSTORMING WORKSHOP ON  
“FEMINIST RESEARCH IN AFRICA : PROGRESS, OBSTACLES  
AND CHALLENGES”  
(Dakar, Hotel Novotel : Friday 30 November 2007)**

**April 2008**

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# Introduction

The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) celebrated its 30 years, in conformity with its commitment to perpetually influence the great research trends in view of its ideals of democracy, equality in rights and opportunities between men and women.

On November 30th, 2007, AAWORD organized a one-day brainstorming workshop on “Feminist Research in Africa: Progress, Obstacles and Challenges» at Hotel Novotel in Dakar.

The theme of the feminist research was selected in relation with its role both in the evolution of the women’s movement and the progress made for the benefit of women in general.

The African feminist research resulted in a great awareness of the components of the African society, on the condition of African women. It took an active part in the renewal of paradigms, concepts and theories produced by the feminists from the North.

Today as at any time before, this research is questioned by multiple challenges linked to globalization, the rise of intolerance, the identity claim, the increasing of inequalities. Despite the important obstacles which affect it (the women’s movement in Africa as well) research has to respond theoretical, practical, and institutional issues, which still paralyzes women’s citizenship in Africa.

Issues such as the guaranteed rights acquired by women, and to which the feminist research contributed, the obstacles, the challenges and the perspectives of this feminist research in Africa, call out the whole Community of researchers. It is important to take stock of the issues raised by the feminist research in an African context where identity discourses are dominating worldwide. Indeed, this trend severely tests the universality of human rights and the principle of equality claimed decades ago, by the African women’s movement where African researchers played a fundamental role.

The main objectives assigned to this important brainstorming are:

- To analyze the rights acquired by women in public and private spheres to which feminist research contributed;
- To identify the theoretical, methodological and ideological obstacles to which feminist research is confronted with in Africa;
- To examine the challenges and perspectives of the feminist research in Africa in terms of stakes, African feminist discourse, priorities and actions.

AAWORD makes a positive assessment of that day to which took part members coming from different regions of the continent, representatives of local and regional organizations and international cooperation institutions

**Synthesis of the brainstorming on “Feminist Research in Africa: Progress, Obstacles and Challenges”.**

## Opening Ceremony

### 1-Welcoming remarks - by Ms. Marèma Touré , President of AAWORD-Senegal

After welcoming guests and participants, she put emphasis on the relevance of the theme of the symposium.

For the thirty years of AAWORD, a better theme couldn't be found as it was during the historical symposium which took place in Dakar in 1977 that AAWORD was created. Referring to Majorie Mbilinyi, she pointed out that AAWORD was born in a context of a crowd of western women researchers who would gather information in Africa, for the attention of non-African readers and take the acquired knowledge to their home countries.

In this context Ms. Touré recalled the great claim to break with the intellectual division of research that used to put conceptualization out of Africa. At that time, the necessity was felt to "Africanize" the research by clearing some prisms, to create relevant concepts and new methodologies. AAWORD contributed remarkably to the debates on the social relationship and on the consolidation of the theoretical and conceptual achievements.

Today, Africa is still affected by a deficiency in the theoretical concepts of African realities. In this regard the theories on the way African Women are oppressed, are fundamental.

Ms. Touré concluded that the difficulties African women are facing in having access to the required financial resources without any condition in order to identify their own priorities, are real obstacles.

## **2- Address by Ms. N'dèye Astou Sylla, FEMNET representative**

Ms. Sylla thanked AAWORD for inviting her organization FEMNET, to this symposium that is of a great interest for them. FEMNET is interested in any brainstorming and exchanges between women worldwide on gender relations. Indeed, it is important for women to discuss the issue and come up with common positions. FEMNET positions itself as a recipient for any program integrating this challenge in order to prepare the World Social Forum.

## **3- Address by Mr. Ahmed Gumah, representing ECOWAS Gender Development Centre**

Mr. Gumah, on behalf of Prof. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, conveyed his congratulations to AAWORD for the organization of this workshop which is a relevant response to the current demand on brainstorming on the equality issue. It is up to the research to make it possible to identify the factors that favor inequalities. But we are compelled to deplore the insufficient investments that could make it easier. The leaders of ECOWAS wanted to give a response to this concern when they created the ECOWAS Gender Development Center and the "ECOWAS Gender Policy" in 2005 as well. Their main objective is the development of synergies aiming at addressing the gender issues at the regional level.

## **4- Address by Ms. Ramata Molo Thioune, IDRC Representative**

After conveying the congratulations of IDRC director, Ms. Thioune thanked AAWORD for inviting her Institution to the meeting. She put emphasis on the IDRC actions which go in two directions: a horizontal one and a vertical one. One of the dimensions, essentially feminist-oriented is based on women's rights and citizenship. IDRC is very keen to support its partners to highly contribute in the gender debate. One of the main priorities of its program is research. The identified strategy is the support toward the emergence of a young generation of women researchers in Africa where feminist research is stigmatized.

Emphasizing on some challenges and obstacles of the feminist research in Africa Ms. Thioune insisted on some issues relating to Methodology, the debate on the use of qualitative methods versus quantitative ones, the trend and the habit to have recourse to focus group. She dealt with the advantages of these approaches questioning their relevance. Facing the increasing rise of qualitative approaches, she questioned the assessment of their validity and rigor in their implementation.

She exhorted to think about the issue which for her, is of high importance.

## **5- Address by her Excellency Mrs. Yaye Kene Gassama-Dia, Minister of Scientific Research.**

The Minister commended the initiative of the committed women researchers who organized the Symposium. She put emphasis on the relevance of the feminist research in today's world. The latter is called out by the theoretical issues affecting women's condition in Africa. For the Minister, we must acknowledge that "societies are obviously moving toward a great participation of women in decision making spheres». In that respect, she recalled the commitment of the Senegalese Head of State.

The Minister also noted that the most important social changes, particularly those that affect attitudes and behaviors require a full preparation. In this regard, it is important that feminist research be stowed to economic and social concerns. She pointed out the necessity to summon up one's patience as attitudes' changes are very slow. Therefore, feminist researchers have to be in accordance with the economic and social concerns of their milieu, if they want their work to be acknowledged and used at their real value.

### **6- Introductory Note – by Prof. Malika Benradi, AAWORD President**

Prof. Malika Benradi warmly thanked all represented organizations and all participants for returning AAWORD's invitation.

She underlined the fact that African women in the past were subjects of studies of western male and female researchers and nowadays they have become full actors in brainstorming about their own life.

From her point of view, it is an important step forward even if there is still much to do. She put emphasis on the contribution of "black feminism" in the redefinition of paradigms of feminism and on the necessity of a combined approach of gender, race and class.

Prof. Benradi insisted on the highly political dimension of the feminist research by observing notably an indissoluble link between sexism and racism, patriarchy and neo-liberal policies.

Prof. Benradi asserted that as far as the debate on the research methodology is concerned, knowledge does not claim to be asexual, neutral and without commitment; but that does not at all rule out the scientific rigor in feminist research. She raised some difficulties and challenges faced by feminist research in Africa which are namely:

- The difficulty in getting fundings considering the demands imposed by donors which are not of course interested in the research themes identified by male and female researchers as priority issues for Africa.
- The under use of the African scientific production in the development practice;
- The frequent gap existing between theory and practice.

## **Presentations and Discussion**

The different papers dealt with the progress, obstacles and challenges linked to feminist research. Thus, the themes presented were thoroughly discussed in the sessions.

The sessions were articulated as follow:

### **Session 1: Feminist research in Africa: the Progress**

Discussant: Mrs. Marèma Touré-Thiam, President of AAWORD-Senegal

#### **Presenters:**

Ms. Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui, AAWORD-Tunisia.

Ms. Massan D'Almeida, AAWORD-Togo

### **Session 2: "Feminist research in Africa: the Obstacles"**

#### **Presenters:**

Ms. Codou Bop AAWORD-Senegal  
- Ms. Oumoul Khayri Niang AAWORD-Senegal

### **Session 3: “Feminist research in Africa: the Challenges”**

#### **Presenters**

- Prof. Lai Oluode, University of Lagos  
-Ms. Naima Chikaoui AAWORD-Morocco

### **Session 4: General discussion**

Discussant: Mr. Fatou Sarr, Director , UCAD Gender Laboratory

## **Synthesis of presentations**

### ***Presentation by Ms. Saida Draoui – AAWORD Tunisia***

Ms. Dorra Mahfoudh put the emphasis on the evolution of feminist research in Africa, highlighting the case of Tunisia.

For Ms. Mahfoudh, the intolerance and non acceptance environment which was prevailing in most African countries delayed the evolution of the feminist research which took time to assert itself, but thanks to more favorable contextual factors, moved rapidly and found a more and more recognized place in the scientific environment.

Ms. Mahfoudh demonstrated that feminist research is somewhat recent. In the past, women were objects of research and not subjects of research. At first, that feminist research was introduced according to a top down approach and evolved in the late 70's, thanks to a more open national context (liberal turning point) and also under the effect of a more favorable international environment. The rise of new actors (labour, trade-union and education fields), and of new brainstorming perspectives allowed a regeneration of research on women and women research developed in many areas. The various publications (results of the researches, feminist newspapers etc), the institutionalization of national mechanisms in charge of the feminist issue (from 1992), the development of strategies to fight against gender violence to which the university contributed to (modules on gender and violence) were so much progress.

Ms. Mahfoudh highlighted the participation of Tunisian women in the creation of AAWORD, which demonstrate their commitment for change of paradigms in the field of research on women. She pointed out that in the past (10-18 years ago) for recruitment purposes, it was not uncommon for Tunisian women to remove from their CVs, the publications they produced on gender issues.

Gradually, feminist research managed to assert itself through reliable scientific publications and a commitment to women's struggles.

In Ms. Mahfoudh's view, the challenges have to focus on:

- the choice of the research themes;
- The questioning of working methods in order to assess the efficiency and the effective use of the research by women's groups;
- The existence of a split between the research institutes and the organizations for the defense of women's rights at the grassroots level, which do not really use the research results.

### **Presentation by Ms. Massan D'Almeida- AAWORD Togo**

After questioning the concept of African Feminist Research; Ms. Massan D’Almeida defined it as being a socio-political project for the transformation of social relationship and a scientific project of Knowledge building. This definition is two-fold because it is rooted in the women’s movement demands and adheres to the principles and processes of the human, social and natural sciences. In its analysis, feminist research aims at de-constructing the non-egalitarian social relations between men and women.

In her presentation, Ms. D’Almeida dealt with issues such as the great achievement of the women’s movement since Beijing. But she pointed out that 12 years after Beijing very few things have changed. She quoted some progress made: namely an improvement in women’s access to decision in many countries, a legal framework more respectful to human rights and to the struggle against violence on women, and which takes into account the gender issue in conflicts and peace building, etc. Ms. D’Almeida put emphasis on the contribution of the feminist research to women’s struggle in terms of problems understanding and of socio-economic status transformation that legitimate and perpetuate women’s subordination. She ended her presentation by drawing a picture on the role AAWORD played in research, training and advocacy in Africa and in the Diaspora. She concluded on AAWORD’s stake in its commitment to contribute to take up the current challenges of feminist research.

### **Presentation by Ms. Codou Bop – AAWORD Senegal**

Ms. Codou Bop defined feminist research as being a perspective and an approach. This perspective aims at enhancing women’s value and actual experiences, validate women’s experiences and defend their interests.

It aims at gender relations taking into account different other dividing, hierarchy and social categorization. The essentially political feminist research requires a scientific approach in a framework of moral and social commitment and not a neutral one. Ms. Bop raised a number of problems and challenges facing feminist research in Africa. The issue of the decolonization of research which arose 30 years ago still remains.

Feminist research in Africa does not come to terms with itself. Women fear to take their feminism upon themselves and many of them see themselves as gender experts when they cannot be neutral. Ms. Bop insisted on the hiatus between gender theory and its practical implementation by raising the problem on the way feminists conceptualized gender 20 years ago in the current development and practices of researchers, donors and Institutions (African Union, ECOWAS). Ms. Bop underlined that the programs for the benefits of women, particularly focus on income generating projects and noted that it is certainly of great importance but it does not change with regard to the female approach. Besides, approaches that are victimizing women are still prevailing.

From Ms. Bop’s point of view, the way gender is used tends to erase the diversities prevailing in women’s groups. Now, “recognizing our differences, growing stronger as researchers is part of our concerns”. Ms. Bop underlined the following challenges:

- The necessity to take upon ourselves the committed aspect of feminist research
- The institutionalization of feminist research in Africa;
- The hegemony of the western feminist research
- Preparing the changeover for the research;
- Enhancement of the value of feminist contributions in the context of globalization with regard to worldwide changes;

### **Presentation by Ms. Oumou Khairy Niang-Mbodj – AAWORD Senegal**

Feminist research is aimed at the feminism object that constitutes gender relations and particularly the inequality between men and women. Its function is to develop knowledge in

order to use arguments in favor of the change of women subordinating structures and institutions and the impetus of women's self independence.

In Africa, feminism is excluded from the public sphere and feminists, for fear of stigmatization and marginalization do not claim the ownership of the ideology. This denial based on political stakes has a repercussion on the status of the feminist research and hampers its visibility and the acknowledgement of its contributions to development.

Ms. Niang-Mbodj dwelt at length on the position of feminist research in relation to traditional research. Traditional research privileges the detachment considered as a factor of scientific objectivity whereas feminist research aiming at social transformation, could be defined by the commitment exerted on its object without affecting the scientific quality.

Refusing to record the contribution of feminist research in the production of knowledge means that its place and validity are denied. In such a context, the production of feminist research in Africa is not capitalized. Feminism, despite its role, is not recognized as a paradigmatic framework. Viewed in this light, the historical and substantial link between feminism and gender concept that is at the core of the development of policies, is not recognized. The commitments in favor of gender equality are deprived of their conceptual base. That is why they cannot be systematically implemented as indicated by the gap between theory and practice.

Ms. Niang-Mbodj concluded by expressing the necessity to create spaces to better clarify and value the links between feminism and gender concept; this will permit high dimension strategies for the advancement of gender equality. This will also contribute in creating intergenerational links within the debate on feminist research and integrating the new generations in Africa's struggle against inequalities, through feminism.

#### **Presentation by Ms. Naima Chikhaoui – AAWORD Morocco**

Ms. Chikhaoui defined feminist research as being both a scientific and an activist act aiming at changing the social reality, transformation power relations.

For Ms. Chikhaoui, the key question is the decolonization of research; a theme that presided over the creation of AAWORD in 1977. This theme aiming at the promotion of African feminist research, has been dealt with under various titles in these last three decades during intellectual meetings of intellectuals, and is still a topical question.

Ms. Chikhaoui situated the obstacles of feminist African research both around Eurocentrism, the influences of feminism's circumstances and the various forms of insufficiencies that affect research in general and particularly the feminist one.

On the one hand Eurocentrism is faced with the western hegemony on thesis explaining male domination, sex hierarchy, patriarchy etc... and on the other hand with the lack of autonomy of African researchers in conceptualization. Whatever the intensity and the degree of legitimacy of the debate on Eurocentrism may be, African women researchers need to know the level of knowledge produced on them in order to produce another knowledge. It is up to them to have a critical vision of that knowledge produced by an external eye and produce a more appropriate knowledge.

Ms. Chikhaoui underlined that the scientific legitimacy of feminist research and its epistemological ground is an achievement for the feminists' intellectual creativity.

Feminism in its various trends, beyond its different points of view represents an advantage for a scientific, multiform, militant, critical, and a comparative research. This plurality will be useful for creativity in the development of scientific arguments in favour of political claims.

Feminist research in Africa is poorly financed. Affected by the same evils than research in general, it depends on foreign financing and therefore is affected by its weak capacity of negotiation.

Ms. Chikhaoui mentioned the institutionalization of feminist researches and feminist studies such as the gender research units in institutes and Universities in the last 20 years. The merchandisation of knowledge and learning remains an obstacle.

She concluded on the institutional following granted to the gender concept more legalized than Feminism and called on for an assessment of experiences in that field.

### **Presentation by Prof. Lai Olurode – Lagos University**

Prof. Olurode tackled the problem of a fractured African Feminist research while stressing on some challenges, which are the feminist characterization, the identity issue, and the production of Knowledge.

He raised a couple of problems, particularly issues connected with the definition of feminism, the reconciliation between commitment and scientific process, and the analysis paradigms of women inferiority, links between the spheres of production and reproduction, and relationships between men and women.

He concluded by pointing out that research must feed the political and social activities while stressing on the challenges of the documentation related to important researches.

### **Synthesis of the discussions**

Ms. Fatou Sarr, the discussant of the General Debate Session, put the emphasis on some key points of the presentations while commenting them. These are namely:

- The definition of feminism
- The relationship with the West and the breaking off issue.
- The inequality between the North which conceptualizes and records some progress and the South which provides basic data.
- The challenge of the political awareness
- The perspective of a transformation of social relations and the issue of the renewal of the thinking on gender relations;
- The gender issue at university level;
- The junction of the social movement and research (ex: of the parity in comparison with the social realities)
- The both transdisciplinary and plural gender concept involves the convergence of the women's movement, research and the field.

For Ms. Sarr it is important to pursue the thought.

The presenters, throughout the sessions, dealt with the issues from different approaches:

- The merchandization of the thought at the global level with a global framework where African women researchers are facing difficulties in valuing their creativity and their capacity to produce a vision. This raises the problem of the autonomy of the thought with regards to gender, which was made more difficult in the context of globalization. The main challenge is to develop the capacities of women researchers to ensure a methodological and pragmatic break off.
- The resistances to feminism (at university level and in other spheres) refer to the issue of objectivity, convey some clichés and a stereotyped perception with regard to feminism.

The stakes linked to feminist research are:

- The creation of a link between research and the transforming activity by basing the development of concepts on the social realities and the questioning of power relations models in the different sectors.
- The broadening of the research status in order to value the contribution of the various actors working in the field of feminist research.
- The renewal of the human resources through an efficient monitoring of students and young generation of researchers.
- The building up of connection spaces between researchers and grassroots women for the latter to benefit straight from research results.
- Communication between researchers, for the respect of Ethics and Deontology, the development of the capacity of mutual influence between women researchers and of influence upon Donors and the gender institutionalization.
- The thought on the discourse on the additional roles, identity, and of the feminist struggle against all discriminations including the symbolic ones. The thought will also have to aim at the factors which weaken feminist research such as poor budgets, brain-drain, the place of western feminists' writings, the confidence African women have in African women researchers' scientific production, and the subversive scope of feminism etc...
- The elaboration of paradigms that take care of policies and their costs for women, as well as of social movements offensive against the State.
- The diffusion of feminist researchers' works and the practical capitalization of achievements.
- Document through feminist research, observations such as the existing links between crisis and women's access to international decision authorities (Rwanda, Liberia), the contribution they bring to the army, girl's education, etc...
- The development of a vision and prospective actions to contribute to the implementation of the renewal of a scientific thought coming from the South.
- Take care, within the feminist research, of the ``feminization`` of the HIV / AIDS spreading.
- The availability of the research results for those who need them
- The planning of a realistic process for the advancement of feminist research in the long term
- The search for financial resources in order to encourage young people to feminist research.

The thought on African feminist research enables us to come to the conclusion that the progress are substantial, with real obstacles. However the most important thing relates to challenges that are calling on AAWORD. The stakes brought up in the presentations and exchanges are as many factors that could be included in its research programs.