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The emergence and institutionalization of feminist geography in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The emergence and institutionalization of feminist geography in Ghana was in tandem with the global feminist movement in the 1970s and its subsequent international women's conferences. This paper discusses the pioneering work and research at the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana, and its effect on the institutionalization and diffusion of feminist geography in Ghana. Through research and external collaborations, the need for gender as an academic discipline was strongly argued for and instituted as an undergraduate course at the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana. These external collaborations with other feminist geographers in international geography associations and universities served as a boost as they created opportunities for highlighting the spatial variations in the role and situation of particularly women's lives in Ghana. Subsequently, there was a diffusion of feminist geography research and its institutionalization as an academic sub-discipline in Geography departments in other Ghanaian universities. These notwithstanding, the departments of Geography in Ghanaian universities are still dominated by male faculty members. Moreover, research work has been mainly in the field of human geography more than the physical aspects calling for the mainstreaming of gender issues in all the systematic branches of the discipline.

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Development; feminist geography; gender; Ghana; pioneering work

Introduction

The emergence of feminist geography work in Ghana could be traced back to the rise of the global feminist movement in the 1970s, following the influential work of Ester Boserup (e.g. Boserup 1965, 1970). and the first major United Nations conference on women held in Mexico in 1975. With the establishment of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985), and a call on governments to promote the integration of women in national

development, the need to intensify research work on women and gender issues became more prominent on the African agenda. Thus one of the momentous outcomes was the need to promote the integration of women in the development process, and this led to a massive growth and institutionalization of women and gender studies in African academia which included the University of Ghana.

The Department of Geography was one of the initial departments when the University of Ghana was first established in 1948. At its inception, there were only male faculty members that reflected the male-dominated nature of the discipline, as was the case in many geography departments throughout Europe (McDowell and Sharp 1997). It was not until 1974 that the first Ghanaian female was employed as a lecturer at the department. This marked the beginning of a feminization of the department's faculty. This first female faculty came in tandem with the call for intensification of research work on women and gender issues following the United Nations Decade for women. In this paper, we discuss the institutionalization of feminist geography in Ghanaian academia under three main sub-topics: feminist geographical research on women and gender issues; establishment of courses and the teaching of feminist geography; and teaching faculty in geography departments. The final section will focus on the conclusion highlighting the challenges and way forward.

Feminist geographical research

The emergence of investigating gender issues in geography, and feminist geography in Ghana for that matter, could be linked to the era when feminist geography scholars in the global north began to challenge the implicit masculine geographical tradition at that time (see Rose 1993; McDowell and Sharp 1997). Pioneering work in feminist geography in Ghana was in the Department of Geography, University of Ghana, during the mid-1970s. This was when the only female faculty member, Emerita Professor Ardayfio-Schandorf, came onto the scene. Her research work drew attention to the environmental crisis and its relationship to natural and renewable energy resources, and how it affects the work and lives of women (see Ardayfio-Schandorf 1986; 1987). This initial feminist geography research work in Ghana was boosted when the importance of feminist geographies globally was highlighted by the Women and Geography Study Group in 1984 in the publication *'Geography and Gender'*, which was also influenced by the rise of the feminist movements and its associated international women's conferences.

Subsequently, under the direction of Emerita Professor Ardayfio-Schandorf, a major project entitled "the Family and Development Programme" (FADEP)

with a focus on women in family relationships was established in 1994 at the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana. This was a very comprehensive research that involved faculty members from other departments in the University of Ghana and the major universities in the country. It focused on several areas of women's works and lives such as agriculture, family and households with special emphasis on the spatial variations in the role and situation of women in rural and urban Ghana. This was an outstanding landmark in feminist geographical works in Ghana as the research produced no less than 12 publications. Some of the specific publications included *The Changing Family in Ghana* (Ardayfio-Schandorf 1996); the impact of Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Cost of Adjustment on the Family (Ardayfio-Schandorf et al. 1995); *Women's Access to Agricultural Land in the Household* (Benneh et al. 1995); *Gender Roles in Household Allocation of Resources and Decision Making in Ghana* (Brown 1995); and *Reproductive Decision Making Within the Ghanaian Family* (Buor 1995).

It equally marked the beginning of the institutionalization of gender and geography in the Department of Geography. As a further contribution to the progress of feminist geography in Ghana, Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf was appointed the Africa Representative of the Gender and Geography Commission of the International Geographic Union (IGU). This status together with her position as the West Africa Representative of the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau, provided a unique opportunity for the Geography Department of the University of Ghana to host an international Conference on Gender and Geography at the University in 1995. The Conference was therefore a collaboration amongst the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana, the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau and the British Council, Accra, Ghana. In so doing, she also collaborated with Professor Janet Momsen, the Chair of the Gender and Geography group of the IGU. The proceedings of the conference culminated in the publication of the book entitled *Gender, the State and Environmental Change* (Ardayfio-Schandorf and Momsen 2009). This publication has become a major resource book for graduate and under-graduate students in feminist studies in Ghana and other developing countries.

Subsequent research undertaken in the Department of Geography, University of Ghana and in other Ghanaian universities began to include gender perspectives in all their works focusing on women's and men's roles in the environment and natural resource management, agricultural lands, migration, poverty and women's empowerment. Some of this research was done in collaboration with other feminist geographers in external universities. For example, one notable project that enhanced feminist geography in Ghana was the 'New Faces of Poverty Project' which was a collaboration

amongst the University of Ghana, Legon; University of Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway from 2004 to 2008. This project sought to unravel the complexities surrounding feminized poverty in Ghana. In all of these works, the differential experiences of poverty and situation of women vis-a-vis men in Ghana were highlighted. Of the four (4) main thematic areas of the 'New Faces of Poverty' project, the most relevant for our purpose was the "Feminization of Poverty" sub-project coordinated by Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf and Ragnhild Lund of University of Ghana and NTNU respectively. Under this sub-project, different aspects of feminized poverty were researched into namely poverty reduction programs and women's empowerment (Wrigley-Asante 2008), feminized migration in Ghana (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008), and feminized labour in the informal economy such as the stone quarry industry (Lund et al. 2008) and palm kernel oil processing (Awusabo-Asare and Tanle 2008). In many of these studies, feminist qualitative methods (particularly in-depth interviews and case stories) were employed in order to get a deeper and detailed understanding of women's lives from women's own narration and experiences. The approach used focused on the respondents' own understandings of their circumstances and the social structures in which they are implicated. The methodology adopted also aimed at developing strategies to address such situations. A key outcome of the New Faces of Poverty project culminated in the publication of a special issue of the Norwegian Journal of Geography in 2008, which has also become a major resource material for students and faculty members.

Subsequently, gender issues and gender analysis have been incorporated into research projects by faculty members, students and external collaborators. For instance in urban geography, there have been collaborative works by Professor Kate Gough, a geographer, from Loughborough University in the United Kingdom with geographers in University of Ghana. Their research looked into urban livelihoods and mobility in southern Ghana, aspects of which focused on the gender dimensions (see for instance Esson et al. 2016). Other urban geographic research has focused on the strengths and challenges of women in cross-border trading (see for instance Wrigley-Asante 2013). A recent research project on urban poverty and crime, which sought to unravel the spatial relationship between poverty and the incidence of crime in relation to the different socio-economic neighbourhoods in Ghana, highlighted the gender dimensions. Indeed, a core aspect of the project was to ascertain the gender dimensions of the level of security and safety in the different socio-economic neighbourhoods of Ghana and the factors that contributed to the gendered differences (see Wrigley-Asante 2016; Wrigley-Asante et al. 2016). This project received financial support from the United

Kingdom Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada. Research works in health geography have also highlighted gender dimensions such as the air pollution study in urban Ghana (see Arku et al. 2015).

Establishment of courses and the teaching of feminist geography

Following the international Conference on Gender and Geography at the University of Ghana in 1995, an undergraduate course entitled "Geography of Gender and Development in Africa" was developed and introduced that same year by Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf. Even though it is an elective course, it became very popular amongst Geography students and equally attracted students from other disciplines with an average of 100 students (both male and female) subscribing to the course each year. Through interactions at the annual conferences organized by the Ghana Geographical Association (GGA) as well as the global quest for gender mainstreaming, the pioneering work of initiating and establishing gender as an academic course at the Department of Geography, University of Ghana, inspired other geography and non-geography departments in sister universities in Ghana. Some of these departments developed gender-related courses. For instance, at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana, a gender and development course was introduced at the Department of Geography and Rural Development. A similar undergraduate course has also been introduced in the Department of Geography Education in the Faculty of Social Science Education at the University of Education, Winneba, in the Central Region of Ghana. All of these courses are currently running as major undergraduate elective courses in the respective universities and it's being subscribed by both male and female students.

Undoubtedly, the undergraduate gender and development course has become an 'eye-opener' for students and continues to influence students' research projects. The issue of gender has thus become an important field of geographical research in Ghana as it helps bring to bear the spatial dimensions of gender as reflected in some of the systematics in human geography. Students have therefore researched topics such as Women, Employment and Empowerment in Ghana's Export Processing Zones (Obeng 2014); Factors Affecting maternal health care delivery in the Komenda Edina Eguafo Abirem (KEEA) municipality of the Central Region of Ghana (Eshun 2016); Gender dynamics of e-waste management: Reflections from Accra and Kumasi (Osei 2016); Gender dynamics of Climate Change effects on small-holder farmers' livelihoods in the forest savanna transitional zone of Ghana (Essandoh 2018).

With the restructuring of the PhD programs at the University of Ghana in 2013, which included revising courses, a graduate course in feminist

geography was introduced as part of the new 4-year PhD program. The course with the title "Gender, Space and Place: Discourses in Feminist Geography" is currently one of the PhD elective courses that provides a forum for students to debate key concepts such as gender, space, and place and their relationship to geography and geographical research. It is interesting to note that the first batch of six PhD students (2 females and 4 males) in the department under this program all subscribed to this course and incorporated aspects of the key concepts into their theses. Subsequently, the course is being subscribed each year by graduate students.

Teaching faculty in Ghanaian geography departments

Although gender and geography courses have been established in geography units in the universities of Ghana, the challenge remaining is the dominance of male faculty members. At the University of Ghana, there are three female faculty members out of nineteen as at June 2018. These three are an emerita professor (who supports the department by teaching in the PhD program), an associate professor and a senior lecturer. Similar patterns exist in the other universities. For instance, at KNUST, there are only two female lecturers out of a total of eighteen faculty members at the Department of Geography and Rural Development as at July 2017. Also, at the Department of Geography Education at the University of Education, Winneba, there are two females out of the seven faculty members as at June 2018. The few number of female faculty is a major challenge and more has to be done to recruit more females into the various departments.

Concluding remarks

In this report, we argue that the teaching and research in the area of gender and development geography in Ghana has come a long way from the 1970s to present. Over the years, feminist research approaches have become part of geographical research in Ghana with an objective of investigating, revealing and challenging the relationships between gender differences and spatial differences and to make visible how these differences are created (McDowell and Sharp 1997: 91). However, most of feminist geographical research work in Ghana has focused on doing the binary gender analysis, that is, on differences among women and men, and not much on difference across ethnicity, race, class and/or disability. The emphasis has also been mainly in the field of human geography, particularly in environment, rural energy systems, health, urban studies, population and migration, climate change. There has been limited attention to gender issues in the area of physical geography. Most challenging is the fact that gender issues

are yet to be mainstreamed into the teaching of the different branches of human geography. Thus even though teaching and research in the discipline has been institutionalized in higher institutions in Ghana, there still remains more work to be done.

For us, then, it is therefore important that research in gender and geography should be equally focused on both the human and physical aspects of geography. The important, and indeed ultimate, goal is to work systematically towards mainstreaming gender issues in all branches of the discipline so as to engender the teaching of geography as a discipline. Another key issue is the challenge in attracting more female faculty members into the discipline. This could be addressed through mentoring younger females and recruiting them into the departments. It is also important to strengthen collaboration with other feminist geographers in the global north. In this way, there could be joint research projects, short-term exchange of faculty and joint publications to enhance the status, particularly of the departmental female staff in the various universities.

Notes on contributors

Charlotte Wrigley-Asante is an Associate Professor at the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon. She has an MPhil degree in Human Geography from the University of Oslo, Norway and a PhD in Geography from the University of Ghana, with technical support from the Norwegian Council of Universities Committee for Development Research and Education (NUFU). Her PhD thesis focused on gender, poverty and empowerment issues in rural areas of Ghana. She has been a project team member on exploring Crime and Poverty Nexus in Urban Ghana, with funding from the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) as part of Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC) Initiatives. Her current research areas include women and cross border trading issues and gender, crime and safety in urban public spaces.

Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf is the first Ghanaian woman Emerita Professor in Ghana. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in Geography (1969), University of Ghana, and PhD. in Geography University of Birmingham, England (1974). She did post-doctoral studies in Environmental Resource Utilization and Management/Rural Energy Systems at UNIFE/United Nations University, Tokyo, and a second post-doctoral in Women, Public Policy and Development at University of Illinois, Urbana Champagne, USA. She is a Member of the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO and a Member of the Advisory Board of the Journal of Humanities, University of Ghana. She was a former Head of Department of Geography, and Africa Representative of the International Geographical Union.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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