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Charles C. Fonchingong

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Deconstructing Masculinity in a 'Female Bastion': Ambiguities, Contradictions and Insights

By Charles C. Fonchingong¹

Abstract

This article is informed by my experiences teaching women's studies and specifically feminist theory to predominantly female and male students offering Women's studies. As a mainstream academic discipline at the University of Buea, housing the only such Department in Cameroon's Higher Education system, this study uncovers the broader polemics regarding gender and women's studies.

Against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, this study attempts to account for the shifting strands on masculinity and femininity and gender transgressions as played out by students taking women's studies. It also analyses the notions, misconceptions and stereotypes that characterise the discipline of women's studies, specifically at the University of Buea, a replica of the cultural mindset across Cameroon, largely perceived as a female bastion. Borrowing from Derrida's concept of deconstruction, this paper situates inherent biases, contradictions and the mediations surrounding the discipline. The standpoints of male and female students are sought on their reasons for taking women's studies, how they are perceived by their peers in the University of Buea, the stereotypes and labels they are christened with and the ambivalence that surrounds women's studies as a field of scholarship.

The study concludes that women's studies is largely construed as a 'women's affair' and a "no go" area for males, on the pain of being considered effeminate while the female students are seen as fully 'empowered' and, therefore, a potential threat to the patriarchal order. Yet the survival of women's studies as a discipline rests squarely on how it can be viewed by society at large.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Women's Studies, Gender, Stereotype, Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchy

Situating the strands in masculinity and femininity

The identities we have as women or men throughout our lives are not fixed or absolute but multiple and shifting (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). As many have argued, historiographically speaking, academics has focused on men until very recently, reflecting a belated recognition that men also have gender identities (Cornwall 1997), which are subject to change (White 1997). Feminist anthropology has provided ample evidence to show that western understandings of gender, and of biology, are not universal, but particular and culturally specific (Moore, 1998 1993; Strathern, 1988; Guijt and Shah 1998, Wood 1999; Erturk 2004). Understanding gender as a binary concept has become an uncontested tool of analysis within mainstream development theorizing (Erturk 1997a, Goetz 1997).

¹ Charles C. Fonchingong lectures in the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Buea, Cameroon. He is currently a Doctoral candidate in Social Policy at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent at Canterbury.

While this conceptualization is misleading, it is necessary to re-examine the concept of gender for its analytical underpinnings in relation to the discourses on women's studies as a nascent field of scholarship. The premise that gender is the social organization of presumed sexual differences and that it defines the roles and identities associated with femininity and masculinity and their entitlements, provides such a starting point (Goetz 1997 and Wieringa 1998). The thrust of this study is to situate the perspective of Cameroon where the patriarchal structure remains intact and the use of gender synonymously with women can serve to conceal the latter before they have a chance to become visible actors in public space. Connell (1987) differentiates between 'hegemonic' and 'subordinate' masculinity to capture the differential access men have over power and social privilege.

In most of Africa social constructs associated with gender are diverse and subject to constant negotiation and alternatives in every day life as there are plural and fluid in diverse societies of the continent. The dominant gender identities and their patterned interconnectedness are embedded in the patriarchal legacy that manifests itself through particular relations of 'domination and subordination' depending upon the specific cultural context (Johnson 1997). For Hooper (2000:59) 'it is important to know thine enemy...' while Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) are preoccupied with the gendered struggle taking place at the top of the social hierarchy.

From the vignettes of the present study, patriarchy is conceptualised as a determinant of 'manhood' with men's greater visibility as breadwinner and women as some marginal and invisible force (Braidotti 2000). Trapped in plural masculinities, female positions also vary. All femininities are subordinate to hegemonic masculinity at any given time and place. With global restructuring, the patriarchal gender role too is restructured and ruptured as masculinity diversifies, becomes modernized and in some cases, transformed (Grant and Newland 1991, Connell 2000, 2002; Hooper 2000; Kimmel and Kaufman, 1995). Bandarage (1997:17) sees patriarchy as a system attributing female subordination to restricted access and control of means of both production and reproduction in the private and public spheres, though emerging contradictions have challenged the traditional notions of patriarchy (UNDAW 2001: 30). Within the Cameroonian cultural context, this paper strives to diagnose the perception the University community and the larger society have of male and female students offering women's studies. It also seeks to determine the attitudes of peers to students, and especially male students offering women's studies. In this connection, the reasons and motivating factors that account for the engagement of those pursuing women's studies as a field of scholarship are unravelled. The study examines the impact of the institutionalisation of women's studies on the university community and beyond.

The objectives guiding the study were reinforced by the following assumptions:

- 1) The enrolment of more students and especially male students in women's studies can change societal misconceptions of the discipline; and, 2) Male and female students taking women's studies classes are tagged with stereotypes depicting either the lack of a masculine or feminine identity by their collegiate peers and by the community at large.
- 3) The future of women's studies as a discipline hinges on how well societal misconceptions are addressed.

Context of the Study and Concept of Deconstruction

Based on a structured interview schedule, in-depth interviews were held with all male students in the Department of Women and Gender studies (about 10% of the entire number studying women's studies and other mainstream courses) and parallel interviews with ten female students at undergraduate level totalling 40 in each of the levels. It should be noted that women's studies is a double major degree course which spans four years. Students study women's studies alongside mainstream subjects from the Departments of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sociology, Law and Economics and Management (options being Economics, Banking and Finance, Management and Accountancy. Graduates from the department fall in one of the following combinations: Women's studies/Journalism and Mass Communication, Women's Studies/Sociology, Women's Studies/Law, Women's Studies/Economics and Management.

Parallel interviews with female and male students were meant to cross-check for the responses and elements of gender transgressions in order to better understand the ambiguities, contradictions and insights surrounding the discipline. Interviews sought to elicit responses from the students on their understanding of gender, gender deconstruction and influence on gender, community relations and societal interaction, implications of stereotypes and labelling in their understanding of masculinity and femininity, whether patriarchy and insights into male chauvinism were motivating factors for engaging in women's studies; their perception either as male or female students offering women's studies; the wrong notions and misconceptions associated with the discipline and the impact of the discipline in rectifying these notions and stereotypes. Though the participants in the research disclosed their identity, they opted for anonymity.

The concept of deconstruction finds resonance in the works of French philosopher on Language Jacques Derrida. Derrida, who coined the term deconstruction, argues that in Western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in binary oppositions. Something is white but not black, masculine not feminine, a cause rather than an effect. It involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole. Through deconstruction, Derrida aims to erase the boundary between binary oppositions and to do so in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the oppositions is thrown to question (Wood 1987; Murfin and Ray 1998; Hobson 1996; Rorty 1991; Critchley 1996; Norrie 2004). Within the framework of the study, deconstruction means giving new meaning, re-fashioning, re-thinking and re-capturing the dynamics and intersections within Women's studies as a discipline. Contextually, de-emphasizing men's studies constitutes the search for novel pathways of levelling the playing field.

Mapping the contours of Women's studies

In parts of Africa, the end of the 20th century witnessed the rapid growth of different institutional forms of women's and/or gender studies being offered at different levels. However, the University of Buea became the only university in Cameroon with a fully-fledged Department of Women's studies, which was created along with its other departments in 1993 (Endeley and Ardener 2004). The challenge of starting a Department considered by many (including renowned academics in the Cameroon university system, especially in Francophone Cameroon), to be an oddity and a colossal waste of resources and time was facilitated by an enabling environment at the University

of Buea. Those who were not avid champions of the cause, like the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar were at least tolerant of the experiment (Chumbow 2004).

Though the total enrolment of students has risen dramatically from 30 in 1993 to over 330 recently, men constitute less than 10% of those enrolled (Endeley and Ardener 2004). The creation of the Department of Women's Studies was in tandem with the profound conviction that women had been falsely depicted as midgets in an "all male world". It was born out of a desire to reconstruct women's reality through instituted interdisciplinary means, to construct a feminist faculty amongst traditional androcentric-styled faculties, with the paramount mandate of revising both the epistemology and the general catalogue of experiences that have rocked several generations as a result of male prejudices and biases.

It is argued that the Department of Women's Studies recently renamed (Women and Gender Studies) has served as an 'entry point' for dis-engendering and re-engendering knowledge (Endeley and Ardener 2004). Since the inception of the University in 1993, it has been woman managed until September 10th 2005. With a female at the helm of the institution, the gender debate was enhanced. Her willingness in incorporating a gender analytical framework certainly engendered a culture of gender awareness within the university and beyond. This policy as Endeley and Ardener (2004) fostered a gender-friendly disposition and atmosphere. Worthy of note was the ex-female Vice Chancellor's disposition to present gender disaggregated data at major occasions like convocation, matriculation and congregation of the University. Along these lines, Tong (1997) succinctly expresses the purpose of women's studies as an attempt to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation.

It is within this framework that this study seeks to make an input by appraising the centrality of women's studies through the lenses of male and female students. Men have become crucial in shaping the discourse on gender identity, enhancing our knowledge of masculinity and femininity (Pease 2002) and women's studies constitutes an important and contested site of contemporary feminist thought (Crowley 1999).

Profiling the ambiguities surrounding masculinity

As a male lecturer in a Department regarded by many strictly as female and for females, I have often times been confronted with the question "How did you find yourself in Women's Studies and what is it all about?...Man, this women's studies stuff is a big joke and I do not see its relevance in our context..." These assertions point to a general tendency to devalue the discipline. My colleagues have often christened me as "Miss Charles", "Mrs Charles", "home secretary" conveying the image of some "soft", "fragile" "woman-man, half-man/half-woman and domestic worker." These attributes conjure the impression of one who has traded his masculinity by joining the weaker sex. At other times, I have been attacked by staunch traditionalists for indoctrinating the female students so that they dismantle society piecemeal by defying cultural prescriptions. This is the case despite the fact that I teach both male and female students. Such perceptions derived from traditional stereotypes inhabit the popular imagination.

Such line of thinking is in tandem with Tong (1997) who observes that while some see women's studies as a "political polemic", others view feminist theory as "monolithic ideology into which unsuspecting students would be indoctrinated... a random mixture of

complaints. This perception is largely borne from the responses of the interviewees who stated that they are considered to be rebellious of the so-called 'divinely ordered nature' of the African society. They are seen to be instigators of radicalism, and 'hunters of crazy-change'. Unsurprisingly, some continue to question the quintessence of women's studies as a field of scholarship. One of the male interviewees re-iterated this viewpoint: 'It was difficult for me to convince my father that I wanted to read women's studies. His response was: I do not have the resources to support you to undertake a meaningless journey. I can't imagine what you will do with a degree in Women's Studies. Are you going to be a home economics teacher and be trained to engage in domestic work, tailoring and embroidery?'

Another male respondent indicated that he had trying times to convince his father to study women's Studies. His father's response was: 'Listen my son. As future breadwinner and chop-chair (family successor), I wonder what you will do with a degree in Women's Studies. Women's Studies is meant for girls who want to build a career in Home management. It is not for a strong man like you. You have left the hard subjects like Computer Studies, Mathematics, Physics, and Accountancy for whom? Don't betray my dreams and that of the entire family echoing high societal expectations placed on shoulders of 'boys'.'

While the empowerment of women is perceived, more often than not, especially by the community, to be an unorthodox act that inculcates the perversity of in submissiveness, and an unnecessary flame of assertiveness to females, others hold the discipline to ransom 'as an enterprise of female rebellion and resistance engineering'. The female students in the research indicated that they are perceived as 'recalcitrant fellows', 'troublesome and rebellious housewives in the near future' 'feminist fighters for equality' 'bossy and domineering ladies'; 'future divorcees'; 'certain to scare away men' and those 'fighting against the dictates of the holy book-the bible'. A female interviewee put it bluntly: 'we are seen as a bunch of fellows who are being drilled to be on the offensive all the time, to question all what happens around our interactions with men and not to entertain any rubbish from men but to learn the language of fighting back. Some even say that we are trained to be stubborn girls and women and to be on equal footing with men and possibly take control of everything'

Other emerging stereotypes about students offering the discipline are tied to career prospects. As testified by the students, a frequent and traditional question they are confronted with centre around employment avenues and relevance in a competitive job market. In addition, the appellations 'cookery science', 'Higher Domestic Science', 'Home Economics and Management', 'Home Secretaries' often sarcastically used to refer to women's studies students taking women's studies shows how the discipline is misconstrued. Perhaps, these students are perceived as gearing up to become good housewives, caregivers and home managers- a concern borne out of the societal mindset. The tendency is to see these values as natural and unchangeable. This wrong association sheds light on the public/private dichotomy and its implications on the occupation of space. While men are associated with the public arena, women are recognised in the private (domestic sphere), which echoes Barbara Rogers' concept of the domestication of women. Such cultural images of women have been internalised and used as sources of individual attitudes and beliefs (Crawford and Unger 2000), used to define those engaged in Women's Studies. These notions are largely borne out of research by Vivien Burr

(1998) and Renzetti and Curran (1999) who contend that school reading schemes including those of Universities and textbooks also under-represent girls and women especially women's studies today which project women in predominantly domestic or caring roles. Victoria Robinson (1993) captured this succinctly: "studying women's studies can be simultaneously exhilarating and painful as well as illuminating and disconcerting. Perhaps its students have a unique opportunity, as well as an extra advantage, of examining long-held concepts and doctrines deemed valid by other spheres of human enquiry. It can also be a painful and disconcerting experience because every militant male and female engaged in Women's Studies is doomed to face the brunt of a diverse range of perceptions" with a huge share skewed towards negativity. Consequently, the deconstruction of Women's Studies as a discipline rests on how misconceptions and stereotypes are addressed. Male students are either perceived as effeminate (by men) or as heroic, brave and veritable advocates (by females) to the course of women's emancipation as articulated by the interviewees.

Responses from the survey with students of the Department point to 'the burden they carry' of misconceptions, stereotypes and labels from collegiate peers. According to a 3rd year male student, some male school mates perceive them as being effeminate and woman-liking, they are branded nicknames with feminine connotations such as 'John Mary' 'Emmanuel Susan' or 'David Becky'. These christening and gender transgressions conjure images of the weaker sex and questions either the 'hardness' or 'softness' of their masculinity and femininity. These appellations, notwithstanding, the male students contend that their female peers regard them as brave, frank to themselves, true feminists who understand women's predicaments, hence veritable vanguards, advocates and lobbyists.

Noteworthy from interviews that female interviewees are labelled differently: 'woman's advocate' 'male challenger' 'heady ladies' 'equalities' 'hard nut to crack' 'freedom fighter', 'Beijing woman' 'too ambitious for a woman', 'unwomanly' 'Not submissive', 'stubborn and uncompromising', 'those fighting against the dictates of the holy book- the bible'. Some have attributed the misconceptions to the ignorance surrounding the discipline. Some consider those reading Women's Studies as opting for a 'discipline that lacks academic rigour' so that they can earn good GPA's (i.e. Grade Point Average) and consequently a good class of degree as indicated by a male respondent:

'I had been reminded on several occasions that it is a discipline strictly for women and not men and that I opted for it in order to score good grades since it doesn't require too much of a headache in burning the midnight candle.'

Consequently, the male students intimated that they were brandished with names like 'woman-man' 'lazy and slack man' 'some weak and half-man' who are less ambitious, engaging with women's biology and reproductive system. Perhaps, these gender transgressions are largely informed by misconceptions that Women's studies is about women's biology and sexuality. Male students venturing into a discipline that is considered soft was flagged. A male respondent stated: 'I am perceived as an 'academic adventurer who delved into a course that is not challenging. I was deemed as taking an escape route from tough science and social science subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Accountancy and Economics'. The dominant traditional thinking of carving out spheres of influence for men and women is also echoed. A first year male student indicated: 'some of my peers call me 'woman-man' and one who has sold off his birth rights.

Others mockingly state that I am fighting to sell men's rights to women by disapproving of the bible, our traditional laws and customs which is clear that a man remains the family head and decision maker at all times with a man's role to lead and woman to follow'. While women have greater visibility in the domestic arena and invisibility in the public space, men are attributed the public sphere.

As the respondents indicate, some staunch chauvinists subscribe to the view that male students will suffer miss-treatment in future from their wives considering that the discipline is underpinned by concerns for women's empowerment and emancipation. Certainly, they worry about the reversal of roles as these 'unserious and trapped men' will succumb to the whims and caprices of the women's agenda. A first year male student indicated:

'I had been chided on the grounds of offering women's studies in order to have an easy ride over girls'. I have also been brandished as 'woman wrapper' on other occasions'. 'Woman wrapper' represents one who indiscriminately plunges into sexual relationships with women. Another male student stated that: 'I have been mocked for joining the 'gossip wagon' and 'women's corner', signalling the engagement in cheap talk and trivialities, usually a trademark attributable to women.

The above stereotyping is a pointer to the emotional and sexual fragility usually associated with the female folk. A second year student lamented the fact that the cultural milieu constitutes a harbinger of these misconceptions. He says his ambition to vie for a position in his cultural development association was nipped in the bud on the grounds that a man reading women's studies has nothing to offer in terms of societal development. Sarcastically, he was advised to go and contest for a position in a strictly female enclave like women's social networks and bureaus of village development associations.

The male respondents indicated that they are often accosted with the following questions: 'Do men study women's studies'? 'I thought it was a strictly female affair' 'what will you do with a degree in women's studies' while others have been labelled as 'ministers of women's affairs'. Conversely, it is interesting to note that others have been appreciative by referring to them as 'female advocates', 'able lawyers' and 'men who understand women's predicaments'. These conceptions and misconceptions are in consonance with Cornwall's (1997) assertion that 'being a man or a woman is shaped by the many messages we receive from others about what is acceptable or appropriate and over our lives, being a man or woman has different dimensions and in different settings'. The conspicuous presence of men in women's studies classrooms is still a bitter pill to swallow to most patriarchally socialized men and women in society. However, a great proportion of the public, probably the modern, intellectually ventilated and 'hygienized' ones regard men's presence on women's studies course lists as an optimistic step towards a hoped egalitarian society. The genesis of these divergences in opinion is assuredly explained in the words of Lobban (1975) in Vivien Burr (1998) that 'women and men are represented and (probably perceived) in quite different ways' thus, to see a man in an area socially contextualised as the distinctive province of women, is enough reason to explain the flabbergasted nature of most observers.

In this connection, during my short stay (1999) at the centre for Cross- Cultural Research on Women (CCCRW) recently renamed International Gender Studies Centre, University of Oxford as a visiting research fellow, I was confronted by an African woman studying at Oxford. “As a man, how did you find yourself in Women’s Studies?” She went on “I am sure some woman fitted you in.” My response was swift “so only women can study or impart knowledge concerning the so-called women’s issues?” Well, I got to understand later that she was excited to find a man who was doing advocacy for women as the male interviewees in this study have testified. This line of thinking is in tandem with research undertaken by Tadele (1999) in Ethiopia as a man working on an Oxfam gender team. He holds that most men think that if a man works on gender issues, he must lack a strongly ‘masculine’ identity. This is simple because the socialisation process has schooled some individuals into believing that a given sex empathising with an opposite sex is in essence “transforming”, hence as Callendar and Kochems (1983) in Nancy Bonvillain (1998) explicate “... the contributions of males (are) too valuable to promote (and or even necessitate) their transformation.

Deconstructing the category ‘woman’ or ‘man’ reveals a host of assumptions, ideas and judgements that can be understood in terms of people’s experiences and their cultural context (Cornwall 1997). Rencetti and Curran (1999) note that women in the Third World are oppressed by patriarchy. They experience a double deprivation: the deprivation of living in a poor country and the deprivation imposed because they are women.

Notions of soft and hard masculinity and femininity

Several reasons and motivational factors were adduced by students venturing into women’s studies. According to a first year male student, he opted for women’s studies to satisfy the inner desire of knowing more about women: “According to common knowledge, woman was created out of man, subject to man and to meet man’s needs. For this reason, he offered women’s studies to understand why women were created to meet man’s needs and also to understand if a woman could perform the functions of a man and even more’. A female student intimated that she was concerned ‘about the injustices women were subjected to especially at the cultural level and was daunted by the fact that the Almighty had decided to vest much authority in men’. She opted for women’s studies to ‘satisfy the demands of her conscience—getting to know much more about women’s plight especially issues like domestic violence, female genital mutilation, women’s reproductive rights and available avenues for redress. Her mission was informed by an understanding of the workings of gender and how to disentangle women from the injustices they had been immersed in due to stereotypical male dominated/androcentric policies, gender roles, cultural norms and existing social structures’.

Unarguably, the motivating factors for offering women’s studies are in tandem with attempts to deconstruct in order to break down the myths that surrounds gender and gender relations. Most conceptualised gender deconstruction as the breaking down of stereotypes in all spheres of life which have hitherto served in the marginalisation of women. Deconstruction helps to recognize the dynamics of the discipline and the stereotypes and misconceptions that have characterised it. This puts the students in a vantage position to better strategize, cancel wrong notions and be involved in the search for concrete solutions. It entails giving a new reading and re-interpretation to the concept

of gender which falls in line with post modern theorising on masculinity and femininity. A female interviewee put it aptly her reasons for engaging in women's studies: 'it is breaking down the myths that surround gender and gender relations, redefining the societal construction of men and women. If we have to reconstruct, we must retrace our trajectory in order to move in the right direction. As the African saying goes 'two hands can tie a bundle and two heads are better than one', so delving into women's studies will deepen my understanding of the complementarity inherent in our African traditions and thereby taking women from the margins'.

Most of the research participants shared a semblance of opinion. Enrolling in the discipline was motivated by the ill-treatment of their fellow sisters under the guise of tradition. They thought they had a golden opportunity to explore the causes of women's oppression and to be able to proffer solutions on 'how resources can be better allocated for the good of men and women'. This concern is echoed in Mlle Reisz's word of caution to Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings' (p.79).

Globally, women's marginalization is attributed to cultural/traditional prejudices, manipulated by the men for vested interests. Some interviewees indicated the multi-disciplinary nature of the discipline which serves as a veritable platform for cross-fertilization of ideas on the options for gender equity and equality (students taking the course graduate with a double major degree). By extension, economic reasons were also advanced as it is easier to secure a job either with governmental or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the domain of gender and development. Largely, the male students felt that women (their mothers) were a special category (springs of life) and therefore warranted studying to unravel their dilemma. A male respondent affirmed: "we owe the woman-especially our mothers a lot. It is through them that we came to the world. We therefore owe them the challenge to know them better, the context in which they operate and the approach (es) to employ in lifting them from a marginal to a central position in our communities".

From the litany of reasons offered, it is evident that understanding inequities and inequalities is top on the agenda, a concern picked up by Erturk's (2004) research. There is need to shed light on the engendering and dis-engendering nature of Women's studies occasioned by the misinterpretation of gender, women's sexuality, and other systems of male domination such as patriarchy. The issue of sexuality represents a broader societal prejudice against women, embodied in the assumption that what women do think, or say is unimportant or uninteresting (Lorber 1993).

Therefore, engaging in Women's Studies ignites the concern for social change, equity and good conscience between men and women in society. Crawford and Unger (2000) project certain reasons: the desire to achieve critical thought, the desire to have knowledge and understanding about social inequities; male empathy for women, the need to study women as a new complex category and diverse group and the desire for equality and egalitarianism. Attuned to these reasons, the respondents indicate a myriad of concerns and motivating factors for opting to read Women's Studies.

Stereotyping, ambiguities and contradictions

The creation of the Department of Women's Studies has had profound ramifications on the University community and beyond. The Department is in the

frontlines of deconstruction and reconstruction of gender, based on societal stereotypes and misconceptions. The students especially the male students as compiled from the survey remain worthy ambassadors of the discipline. This is in consonance with Tadele's (1999) research. He asserts that 'pragmatically, my identity as a man can be used to further the agenda of women's rights, as I am likely to be listened to by both women and men'. As a corollary, the ex-minister of Higher Education (Prof. Maurice Tchunte) on his maiden tour of the University of Buea (late 2002) was elated when I was introduced as a lecturer in the Department of Women's Studies. He said "un homme au Departement des genre et promotion de la femme, ça nous rassure" translated as "a man in the Department of Women and Gender Studies. It is very encouraging". As a corollary, a first year male student observed that the increasing number of men doing women's studies is proving to the other students and society that women are not the "other" as such but central in the development and advancement of knowledge.

Conversely, the female students hold that they are scoring pluses by proving that women are not 'low class citizens', 'mere housewives', but they also have 'potentials that can be tapped to the fullest', emphasizing the point that 'women's reproductive and domestic work should be accounted for'; cancelling public stereotypes that women's subordination is 'natural' and notions that the woman is the 'weaker sex and firmly recognised only in the domestic sphere'. Spender (1981) in Richardson and Robinson (1993) observe that "...the description and analysis of the omission of women as autonomous human beings, has been one of the most significant contributions made by feminism". All the interviewees were unanimous on the fact that seeing a man defending women's rights will encourage the 'sceptics' to join the caravan. A female interviewee put the new gender horizon thus: 'one thing women's studies has done is to re-present the case that it is an academic discipline that goes beyond women's biology and sexuality. This misrepresentation is being addressed as the discipline seeks to transcend boundaries and barriers by questioning everything on its way...'

A male student re-iterated this concern differently: 'As a man, I have been enlightened on the injustices women are subjected to as a result of cultural norms, patriarchy and what needs to be done on the academic front to put things right. Certainly this is proving that women's studies are not a women's affair but a synergy of both genders. Though there are certainly some parallel tracks undertaken by men and women, integrating the concerns of both genders is vital for development'

The research participants all agree that their knowledge will help Cameroon society to appreciate the fundamental differences and complementarities that should be exploited positively for a partnered, balanced, equitable and sustainable development. This great expectation is captured in the words of a final year male interviewee: 'Taking women's studies certainly puts me in a proper perspective to make a difference in the gender talk. As a male, we are empowered to confront the realities of our society today and to do something about it. It takes two to tangle; fighting discrimination against one-half and harnessing the talents of both constitutes the way forward'. This position is corroborated by Bowles and Klein 1983:3 in Richardson D. and Robinson V. (eds) (1993) who note that "autonomous women's studies... alter fundamentally the nature of all knowledge by shifting the focus from androcentric to a frame of reference in which women's different and differing ideas, experiences, needs and interest are valid in their own right and form the basis of our teaching and learning."

At the familial level, the waves of women's studies have equally been felt. Female interviewees noted changes in parental mentality towards girl children from traditional stereotypically based views to more gender sensitive views, the re-conceptualization of legal provisions that used to be disadvantageous to women and the general but gradual transformation of societal perceptions of women as mere adjuncts to men and not existential entities in their own right, have all been adduced as some of the fall-outs of the discipline. This is discernible from the high female enrolment rates at the University of Buea. A tracer study of students at the University of Buea in the period 1996-1999 revealed that the number of women graduating from most courses is increasing at a faster rate than that for men. The statistics also show keen competition between the sexes with females breaking stereotypes in fields such as mathematics, Chemistry and Accountancy (Lyonga et al 2002). This goes to further invalidate the chauvinistic prejudices of today. Victoria Robinson (1993) affirms "...women's studies has become established as an important field of study in many countries across the world... other academic disciplines such as Sociology and the Humanities are in the process of being transformed as a result of the debates and ideas coming from within Women's Studies".

In spite of the stereotypes and misconceptions as mentioned by the students in the study, we can assert that the public is seeing gender afresh and new horizons are being re-considered as the discipline and all its components have transcended traditional methods of social science research which previously considered women as mere appendages. This is not by happenstance as the outstanding capacity of women's studies 'indoctrinating' and changing the scope of other disciplines to gender sensitivity is one of the most out-powering impact.

Beyond Cameroon, scientific research has changed from mere data lumping and essentialism to a more representative pattern of gender dis-aggregated data. While most disciplines are incorporating the gender component in its analysis, literature has had her language re-modified to extirpate linguistic biases in the normative assessment of women and men. Notably, sexist languages are being re-written and re-considered.

Conclusion

This study has looked at the deconstruction and reconstruction of the ontological category of Women's Studies by revealing privileged insights into the dialectics of gender. Women's studies, seen from the perspectives of respondents throw light on gender transgressions inherent in societal mindset. Rethinking the construction of a gender discourse by transcending stereotypical barriers and overcoming inherent contradictions the discipline is embedded in represents the search for a rational deconstruction. The duality of gender relations and its impact in societal shaping is captured by Connell (1995) "Masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men), and in relation to a general symbolisation of difference (the opposition of femininity to masculinity).

Undertaking a deconstruction of these binary categories has underpinnings on the way men and women, boys and girls negotiate future gender relations in Cameroon. The centrality of Women's Studies as an academic discipline in fostering this drive cannot be overstated. To explore masculinity therefore represents not only a challenge to gender analysis, but to power and culture of the development enterprise as a whole (White

1997). While Women's Studies grew out of a penchant to correct the omission of women as a central category in all works of life, its institutionalisation as a field of study has had profound impact on the evolution of the discipline.

Even more interestingly, students engaged in women's studies have suffered a backlash as a consequence of societal misconceptions of their endeavours. Whatever the nature of the stereotypes, labels, and misconceptions, because no society is static and socialisation trends are very dynamic, this critical mass of negative perceptions is changing towards feminist-friendly horizons. As Chumbow (2004) observes, culture (including university culture) thrives on tradition. Tradition, in turn, is the result of enculturation of a collective experience over a period of time. Such changes in perception are having serious underpinnings on the re-conceptualisation of women's studies. One of such fall-outs of the institutionalisation of the discipline has been the movement of women's studies from the realm of opinion to the realm of a core social science discipline. Age-old aphorisms like "Behind every successful man is a powerful woman" are being recanted to "Besides every successful man is a powerful woman" to suit the changing times. The students in the study provide a testament of their intriguing role as future ambassadors of the 'woman question', its underpinnings for gender relations in Cameroon in stamping out anachronistic gender stereotypes.

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