

---

April 2020

## A Room, A Chair, and A Desk: Founding Voices of Women's and Gender Studies in Uganda

Adrianna L. Ernstberger  
*Marian University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ernstberger, Adrianna L. (2020). A Room, A Chair, and A Desk: Founding Voices of Women's and Gender Studies in Uganda. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 4-16.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/2>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## **A Room, A Chair, and A Desk: Founding Voices of Women's and Gender Studies in Uganda**

By Adrianna L. Ernstberger<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper studies the birth and development of women's and gender studies in Uganda. I conducted this research as part of a doctoral thesis on the history of women's and gender studies in the Global South. Using feminist and standpoint theories, much of the research includes oral histories gathered over the course of three years of field work in Uganda. From the moment I heard my professor say, "I learned to be a feminist from Ugandan women," I knew that I wanted to understand the history of women's and gender studies in the country. In sub-Saharan Africa, the discipline of women's and gender studies has made dramatic inroads into the academy through the development of degree-granting undergraduate and graduate programs, the creation of research centers and institutes, and the growth of African feminist theory. Using Uganda as a case study, we can look to the oldest program of its kind in Africa to trace the birth of the discipline on the continent. The history of women's and gender studies in Uganda speaks to ways in which the discipline in the Global South has, since its inception, been entrenched in transnational feminism and an intersectional curriculum rooted in indigenous feminisms.

*Keywords:* Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Global South Feminism, African Feminism, women in Uganda, Uganda

### **Introduction**

Within two hours of my arrival in Kampala, Uganda I became keenly aware of three quintessential elements of the city: red clay, pineapple, and gender studies. What do dirt, fruit and political ideology have in common, one might ask? The answer became clear as I wandered around Wandegeya Market, just outside the gates of Makerere University. Ugandan red clay is dense enough to form bricks that are used to pave roads and build homes, while also delicate enough that it creates a fine mist of dust, a dust that covers everything within its reach. My shoes, clothes, and skin quickly took on the distinctly reddish tone that is so ubiquitous with the region that tourists are offered "red dirt lattes" and t-shirts are sold with slogans such as "I walked the red dirt roads of Uganda." Atop this bed of dusty red clay, you find the heartbeat of the market, the men and women selling their wares. Vendors sell everything from second-hand shoes to cell phone calling cards to locally grown fruits and vegetables. Among all the fruit sold in the market, pineapple is the most prolific. The juicy, tender, delicious pineapple of Uganda is sold at almost every table and on every corner. Thus, shortly after my arrival in Uganda I found myself covered in a haze of

---

<sup>1</sup> Adrianna Ernstberger is an Assistant Professor of History and Director of Gender Studies at Marian University in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her current research explores the social, political and institutional history of academic feminism, specifically focusing on the emergence of women's & gender studies in universities throughout the Global South. Dr. Ernstberger also conducts research on Transnational Women's Movements, Women and Slave Resistance, and the intersections of race, class, and gender in the development of tertiary curriculum globally.

red dust, eating freshly sliced pineapple, and discussing women's and gender studies (WGS) with a six-year old boy selling fruit in the market.

I am sad to confess that I did not get his name, as I was really only struck by the conversation's significance when thinking about it in retrospect. The young boy sold me some fruit while we engaged in the pleasantries of the market. The exchange of "hello" and "how are you today" was followed by the inevitable questions of "where are you from" and "what do you do?" I told him that I was a graduate student from America studying history and women's studies, to which he responded, "Oh, you study gender?" Slightly taken aback by the easy use of a word that typically stumps my undergraduate students for at least the first week of an Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course, I responded, "Yes, I do. Do you know about gender?" Without missing a beat, he smiled at me with that patient smile children often give adults when they have asked a silly question and said, "Yes, its men's and women's stuff." Now, of course there is a world of nuance and more high-minded theoretical information that goes into the study of gender, but I was amazed by the fact that the term itself had become so mainstream that in a bustling marketplace a young boy, clearly working in the market and not studying in a classroom, was able to articulate a basic familiarity with the word "gender." This is how I started on my path to find out how WGS came to be as commonplace to contemporary Kampala as red dirt and pineapple.

### **The Beginning of the Beginning**

In 1975, the First United Nations Conference on Women took place in Mexico City, Mexico, catapulting women's rights and questions about the status of women into international political debate. Ten years later, the Third United Nations Conference on Women took place in Nairobi, Kenya, allowing women throughout the Global South access to both the general conference and the conference's NGO Forum. The Third United Nations Women's Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 marks the naissance of WGS in Uganda.

While the program would not enroll its first class until the fall of 1991, it was at this conference that the founding pioneers began the work that led to the development of the Department of Women's Studies at Makerere University. During the panels, meetings, and workshops held during the NGO Forum in Nairobi, three of the founding pioneers of the School of Women and Gender Studies—Eleanor Maxine Ankrah, Deborah Kasente, and Victoria Mwaka—decided to work together to elevate the status of women in Uganda.

Ankrah is a retired professor of sociology from Uganda Christian University in Mukono, Uganda and describes herself as an "activist, consultant, and occasional lecturer" (personal communication, June 2012). She first came to Uganda in 1974 under a missionary visa with her husband, the late Canon Kwodwo Esuman Ankrah. Born January 29, 1934 in Winterville, North Carolina, Ankrah fell in love with the Ugandan people and the country itself. So much so that in February 2012 she became a Ugandan citizen. She began teaching at Makerere University in the Department of Sociology in 1975. During the later years of Idi Amin's reign, Ankrah took her two children to Kenya and began working on her PhD in sociology at the University of Nairobi.<sup>2</sup> Earning her PhD gave her, in her eyes, legitimacy within the university system to advocate for both women's rights within the university in general and for the creation of a WGS program specifically.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Idi Amin, see Decker, A. C. (2014). *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Ankrah, like all of the past attendees I spoke with, remembered the Nairobi conference as a major turning point in her life. Ankrah stated, "I will forever remember Nairobi with an overwhelming sense of awe. There we were, over four thousand women from all over the world, standing side by side. We were there to meet about peace, about development, about women's rights, about just so many critical issues...issues critical to women" (personal communication, June 2012). She also spoke of the wide demarcation between women who attended as state envoys, such as Miria Obote, the wife of then-President Milton Obote, and women who attended for their own political purposes. She explained that "there were those women who were there because of their husbands, in fact, very few women were there because of their own activism or inquiry." She went on to explain that the political discord in the months leading up to the conference was the reason so few delegates from Uganda were in attendance. Ankrah asserted that only those in "good affiliation" to Obote were able to receive government sponsorship to attend the conference. Others, such as herself and other women from Makerere University, were scrambling to raise funds; "people were selling their cows, working two and three jobs, leading fundraisers at church, and reaching out to any and all social welfare within and beyond the state" in order to attend the conference, Ankrah explained. She highlighted the sense of urgency surrounding the conference when she stated that "there was a frenetic energy among us women... We knew this was the time for us to act."

Similarly, Kasente maintains powerful feelings about the Nairobi conference. Kasente is an associate professor of women and gender studies at Makerere University with degrees in English and education from Makerere University and a PhD in educational psychology from Kenyatta University. When discussing the conference in Nairobi, Kasente reflected that "it was the most exciting part of my life, I think" (personal communication, July 2012). Kasente echoed Ankrah's point that gaining permission and funds to attend the conference was very challenging, stating that "going was very difficult because you had to be classified as *not* anti-regime," that is, not opposed to the Obote regime. As the chair of the Uganda Association of University Women and being in good political standing, Kasente was able to secure the necessary visas and funding to support her attendance (Uganda Association, n.d.). She was adamant that this was a critical moment not only in her life but also in the lives of Ugandan women as a whole, even those who were not in attendance. Kasente exclaimed, "I cannot say enough about it! When we got there, especially to the NGO Forum, I just looked around and thought 'My God, this is what I've been dreaming about'" (personal communication, July 2012). She remembers being surprised that the "feminists" were "not talking just about all the sexuality stuff. They were talking about the world, about discrimination and international issues. I found the whole experience very enlightening." It was at the Nairobi conference that she was introduced to WGS as an academic discipline and where she saw its potential for political and social transformation.

Kasente and Ankrah concurred that the most exciting impact of the conference was the work that began after the delegates returned to Uganda. Ankrah memorably splashed her cup of tea on her lap as she waved her arms, excitedly telling me, "We came out of Nairobi on fire!" (personal communication, June 2012). She went on to extrapolate that "we came back to Uganda, just one week before Obote was overthrown. I remember sitting for tea with Joy Kwesiga and Kasente and saying to them: 'What now? Where are we headed? What are we going to do with all of this information?' We all agreed that we must start something here in Uganda." Likewise, Kasente recalled returning from the conference and immediately beginning work with Ankrah.

Before work could begin on WGS in Uganda, there first needed to be an assessment of the needs of Ugandan women and the establishment of an organization that would work toward

meeting those needs. Due both to the divide between state and non-state delegates at the Nairobi conference and the unique challenges faced by women throughout the recent political instability and dictatorship, it was clear that Ugandan women needed an organization that was led by women and independent of the government.

Ankrah pointed out that, upon returning from Nairobi, they were concerned with creating programs that served women outside of family welfare issues. She stated “that was the critical issue; we had to take action outside of the family...actions that led to development. Development of and for women. We had to move towards women’s rights. It was the first time that a significant movement towards women’s rights—not just human rights, but women’s rights—took hold in Uganda.” The enthusiasm that they received from women all over Uganda toward the creation of a national women’s association stood out to her. She recalled “it was amazing how responsive people were.” She went on to explain that many things came together very quickly: “We started as three women in a small room on [Makerere’s] campus in July [1985], and then it became six and then by November [1985] there were at least nineteen of us actively committed to the establishment of ACFODE [Action for Development] and a women’s studies program at Makerere University.”

On November 19, 1985, just four months after returning from Nairobi, Uganda’s first national organization for women, Action for Development (ACFODE), was established. ACFODE remains the largest organization for women in Uganda, working toward women’s empowerment and gender equality. ACFODE’s vision of “a just society where gender equality is a reality,” and mission statement, “to empower women and influence legislation and policy for gender equality in Uganda,” have remained steadfast for over thirty years (Action for Development, n.d.). The earliest initiatives of ACFODE, and the women involved in it, were focused on myriad aspects of women’s empowerment, be it through education, political reform, social services, or economic policies. As such, ACFODE has utilized “consolidated advocacy for policy formulation, research, capacity building, coalition building, mobilization and sensitization as its core strategies geared towards enhancing the capacity of Ugandans to champion the women’s cause and gender equality on the national agenda,” according to their website.

ACFODE published a brief history of the organization, *25 Years: A Shattered Dream Gave Birth to ACFODE’s Incredible Journey*, in 2010, documenting the names of key founders, such as Hilda Tadria, Ruth Mukama, Kwesiga, and Ankrah (Action for Development, n.d.). However, it is important to mention that in numerous interviews, including those with several of the founding pioneers, the women were uncomfortable with the idea of “naming” the key founders. Kwesiga best articulated this discomfort when she said, “Oh, there were so many of us early on. Obviously those that had been in Nairobi were very active, but there were so many others...female parliamentarians, academics, just so many of us...so to me, to name names, I think that wouldn’t be precise” (personal communication, June 2012). This felt less like an attempt to be modest or to avoid missing an important name, and more like a conscious desire to eschew a figure-head history. Instead the early founders regularly focused on the history of the organization or associations as a whole. That said the majority of women who were named had all attended the Nairobi conference; as such, the connection between the conference and the development of WGS in Uganda cannot be ignored.

### From a Room to a School

In July 1987, several members of the founding committee introduced the proposal for a WGS program at Makerere University at the Donors Council meeting. After the committee spent two years planning, research, and capacity building, the university approved the implementation of the program, so beginning WGS in Uganda. Reflecting on the strategies employed in the early development of the program, Ankrah stated: “the genius of our plan was in its simplicity. When I drafted the initial report that went before the University Senate, I asked only for one room, one desk, and one chair. I said that we would start at the master's level in order to train future instructors, and I promised that if we have just ten students initially, we could make the program run” (personal communication, June 2012). And that is exactly what the university gave them: no less, no more. The newly approved endeavor was housed in a tiny basement room, with a single desk and a single chair. Mwaka, with what appeared to be equal parts chagrin and nostalgia, stated, “If more than one of us was there, we would try to borrow chairs from other rooms. But if more than three of us needed to meet, we could not fit...so we usually met either in our own departments, or off campus depending on our needs” (personal communication, June 2012). In *Celebrating 10 Years of Existence: Department of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University*, the editors Stella Mukasa and Nite B. Tanzarn (2002) echoed these early structural dynamics, stating:

[T]he department is housed in a small basement room. For furniture you had three chairs, one for the Head of the Department, another one allocated to the staff members, to use in turns and the other one for students. For equipment: One borrowed typewriter. For a library, several cardboard boxes all of which you need to check through each time you need to locate a book for a student. Using these facilities, [we were] to conduct an MA Programme in Gender Studies for 10 students. (p. 9)

In spite of the structural inadequacies, which included not only extremely limited space and resources but also limited initial support, the program flourished. The next several years were a flurry of fundraising, curriculum development, and bureaucratic navigations.

Each of the founding pioneers made a point of mentioning, in one way or another, the challenges that they faced not only in securing financial support but also in getting their colleagues and university officials on board. Kasente stated that efforts to gain support for the new discipline were taxing as “people didn't really take it seriously. Not for any reason other than they didn't understand what it was about” (personal communication, July 2012). She pointed out that it was understandable in some ways since she had only just become familiar with the topics herself. As such, she asserted that “to expect everybody to be excited to pick it [women's and gender studies] up, I think, was expecting too much.” As we discussed more about the push to establish the program after the initial Senate approval, Kasente, somewhat jokingly, looked around to ensure no one was listening and explained that in the early years of the program they had to be somewhat discreet in their work. She said, “It was a lot of hustling and pushing and maneuvering and most of it let's say 70% of the work had to be done underground, to get the department started.” The need to be strategic in how they approached this project stemmed not just from Uganda's recent history of political instability or fears of political/legal consequences but also from the social capital that could be lost by associating themselves with the Western import of feminism.

Finally, in the fall of 1991, Makerere University enrolled its first students in pursuit of a master's degree in women's studies. From 1991 through 1998, the department focused on

developing its master's program. With the name change from the Department of Women's Studies to the Department of Women and Gender Studies in 1992, the program also incorporated a more gender-sensitive focus that encouraged the study of feminist theory within a specifically African framework, and gender and development issues more broadly. In 2000, the department initiated doctoral and bachelor's degree programs, both of which have continued to grow. In 2002, the department hosted the Eighth International Women's Worlds Conference, both a first for Uganda and for Africa. The conference was a major highlight of the department's growth, and evidence of its transnational networking. At this conference, a new building was dedicated, and *Celebrating 10 Years of Existence* was released. Finally, in 2011, the university promoted the Department of Women and Gender Studies to the status of a school. It fell under the leadership of its own dean, Consolata Kabonesa, and was renamed the School of Women and Gender Studies.

In their own historical record, the Department of Women and Gender Studies has taken great effort to establish the connections between the United Nations Decade for Women, the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, and the Ugandan Women's Movement as critical elements in setting the stage for the development of a WGS program at Makerere (Department, 2002). Furthermore, it also highlights the relationship between the increase in women's NGOs and the establishment of both the Association of University Women and the Ministry of Women in Development as essential to both the support of the program and the increased visibility of women's issues in Uganda. WGS in Uganda was inherently transnational from its inception and remains so still today.

### **Scholarship on Women's and Gender Studies in Uganda**

While there has been significant academic research on the histories of WGS in countries such as Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya, there has been relatively little study of the School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University. As the oldest national university in East Africa, as well as the home of the oldest sustained WGS program on the continent, this is a significant history that has been either overlooked in general or reduced to institutional histories.

The first and only monograph on the School of Women and Gender Studies, *Celebrating 10 Years of Existence*, was self-published in 2002 in preparation for the Eighth International Women's Worlds Conference. The then-named Department of Women and Gender Studies hosted the conference, which was held in Africa for the first time in the conference's history. This book offers an overview of the history of WGS in the country, focusing heavily on the role of international donors such as the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), the British Council's Department for International Development (DFID), and the Swedish Agency for Research with Developing Countries (SIDA-SAREC). In addition to addressing the sources of much of the department's initial funding, the editors also pay special tribute to the role of the Ugandan government and the support of the university in the establishment of the department, stating that the "establishment of the Department of WGS in 1991, was an outcome of a four year process of advocacy and lobbying by members of the Ugandan Women's Movement on the one hand, and the goodwill and commitment of the Makerere University administration on the other" (Department, 2002, p. vii). Citing the Constitution as an example of the government's commitment to gender egalitarianism and the improvement of the status of women, the editors point out some of the progressive constitutional frameworks such as gender balances in representation, rights of

women and children, and affirmative action policies to increase the number of women in government and higher education (pp. 1-3).<sup>3</sup>

Carol Sicherman's 2005 book, *Becoming an African University: Makerere 1920 – 2000*, offers the first and only historical study of the development of the School of Women and Gender Studies. Sicherman focuses most heavily on the colonial foundations of the university and its transition from a colonial institution to an independent university. At the conclusion of this historical overview she provides three case studies from Makerere's history, one of which is the birth of the School of Women and Gender Studies, in a chapter she aptly titles "Very Small...Very Mighty: Women and the Rise of Women's and Gender Studies." Much of Sicherman's work focuses on the early years of the program and provides useful information about the role of affirmative action programs in increasing the attendance of female students within the university in general. She argues that the increase in the number of women enrolled through these affirmative action programs greatly helped in the establishment of WGS at Makerere (pp.225-240).

In 1991, Ankrah published a short article in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* about the newly launched program and spoke hopefully about the process of approval sought through the Makerere University Donor's Conference in 1987, as well as the eventual granting of institutional approval through the Council of Makerere University in 1989. She discusses the early assertions that the curriculum would be both interdisciplinary and "women in development"-based. She speaks to the community-wide feeling that "[m]any argue that WGS at Makerere University must highlight the growing consciousness in Uganda that women are disadvantaged in society and that this poses serious problems for development of the nation" (p. 866-867). Ankrah goes on to address the goals of the program, focusing heavily on the need to have gender-sensitive and academically trained staff at the institutional level, the community level, and the national level. Finally, in a reflection of the earlier discussed need to have praxis-driven theory, she points out that "the WGS department intends to build a community-based component by fostering public seminars, lectures, and discussions on major issues affecting women" (p. 868). While this early article is both brief and more descriptive of intentions rather than results, it offers important insight into the early days of the department's formation.

In 1996, Mwaka published an article in *Women's Studies Quarterly* on the role of WGS in Uganda. She offers one of the most complete and developed definitions of WGS in Uganda that I have uncovered, stating:

[T]he essential components of WGS include women's contribution to social processes; women's perceptions of their own lives, their struggles, and aspirations; the roots and structures of inequality that lead to marginalization; and the invisibility and exclusion of women from the scope, approaches, and conceptual frameworks of most intellectual inquiry. WGS should not therefore be defined narrowly, as studies about women or information on women, but rather as a critical instrument for social change, economic, political and academic development and transformation. (p. 462)

As the inaugural chair of the newly established Department of Women's Studies, Mwaka offers insight into the earliest developments of the discipline in Uganda.

---

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of Uganda adopted 1995; see especially Objective VI, "Rights of Women and Children," and Objective XV, Articles 21, 31, 34, 78, and 180, which address equal representation.



Finally, Kasente, a faculty member in the department, published the most recent journal article on the School of Women and Gender Studies in *Feminist Africa* in 2002. Kasente's article is less an overview of the program and more a critique of the program's challenges. Stating that while there has been significant quantitative growth in the program, both in terms of student enrollment and department size, this "...has occurred alongside less and less of a sense of its internal cohesiveness, its accountability to the women's movement and its engagement with issues of gender transformation in the broader society" (p. 1). Kasente links the decline in the strength of the department's role in the community, as well as the decline in its commitment to the lives of everyday Ugandan women, to two main issues: 1) the development of the Ministry of Women and Development, and 2) the hyper-bureaucratic nature of the university itself.

With the installation of the Ministry of Women and Development, Kasente (2002) asserts that there was a distinct power shift. She states that "[t]his political move crucially shifted the center of conceptualization and developing women's strategies for development from the academic to the state arena" (p. 2). In addition, the exceptionally high teaching loads, the institutional shifts in degree requirements and the low salaries negatively impact staff productivity (i.e., their ability to conduct and publish new research). In addition to a shortage of new academic contributions, "the original zeal for social transformation has been significantly watered down" (p. 3).

### **Unintended Outcomes**

The "watering down" of the discipline is a concern that shows up repeatedly in both the literature on WGS globally and in the interviews, I have conducted with WGS students, scholars, and activists in Uganda. Far more than in the Global North, training in WGS has led to professional and economic opportunities in the Global South. For example, I have never had a student approach me to discuss a degree in WGS through the auspices that it was the key to post-graduate employment. Conversely, Kasente and others spoke at length about the high probability of finding a job after graduation influencing students to pursue a WGS degree at Makerere University. She stated that "it's mainly because if you have gender as a credential, it's easier to get employment. That is where the money is because of donor's interests. If you have a qualification in gender, you are positioned well for many jobs" (personal communication, July 2012). I found this echoed during many of my interviews with alumni and current WGS students. When asked why they chose to pursue a degree in WGS, I received several responses about the desire to empower women and interests in various issues relating to women's rights. However, out of thirty-seven interviews, nineteen interviewees' responses indicated job security as their primary motivation for earning a bachelor's or master's degree in WGS.

Amon Mwiine, who completed his master's degree in women and gender studies in 2010, explained that it was his career ambitions that led him to the discipline. He stated: "I think it was out of being optimistic. Though my first choice was to pursue law, I was not able to score enough on the exam. But I was optimistic that this is a new discipline where many people have not yet graduated and maybe when you finish you will get a job better than others" (personal communication, June 2012). Peter Fuuna, who earned a master's degree in women and gender studies in 1998, likewise referred to income earning potential as his major motivator when he stated: "Learning gender means you have many opportunities. I am an instructor here at the university, but I work as a consultant also" (personal communication, June 2012). While of the nine men I interviewed, six of them mentioned professional or economic opportunity as their reason for pursuing degrees in women and gender studies, several women responded similarly.

Hasifa Naluyiga, a 2001 graduate of the master's program, stated: "I was looking for a profession that was selling. When I looked at gender...you can work anywhere with your degree" (personal communication, June 2012).

The growing economic imperative to study WGS in order to secure positions in either the academic or public sector has resulted in a disconnection from the social justice backbone of the discipline. Ankrah spoke of this concern when she observed that "somewhere along the way it became beneficial to be a gender academic and talk about gender, but that has led to less actual work on the nitty gritty issues still facing Ugandan women" (personal communication, June 2012). Several alumni described an evolution in their thinking on the status of women, women's rights, and gender equality. However, illustrative of the decline of a feminist foundation in WGS, the majority of people who came to the discipline for economic advancement also eschewed the title of "feminist" and or had negative thoughts on feminism in general.

The tensions over language and naming, over the use of the word "feminism" or the title feminist, and the contention between "Women's Studies / Gender Studies / Feminist Studies" as official names of WGS programs is rife throughout not only the Global South but also the global history of WGS. Moreover, the increasingly problematic "post-feminist" perspective of institutions, governments, and individuals alike raises concern. All but one of the founding pioneers I spoke with either directly identifies as a feminist or indirectly embraces the term feminism with a positive definition. For example, when asked if she would describe herself as a feminist, Mwaka stated emphatically, "Yes, of course I am a feminist" (personal communication, June 2012). In some cases, the response was more reserved, such as with Kasente:

It takes time for someone to say they are a feminist. In fact, if you were to ask people, I don't think I'm considered a strong feminist because I don't advocate verbally. My feminism is much more in the research. It is responsible for what issues I investigate, and the data that I bring on board for people to use or to know. I find ... I don't get excited about going to push political issues loudly on the radio or television, that kind of thing. But, yes, I would say I am a feminist. (personal communication, July 2012)

Ankrah was the only founder to directly dispute the title, stating:

You know, at my age [74], I don't even know the definition anymore. The word that I felt most comfortable with was activist, or someone working and fighting for women's rights. This notion of feminism, I don't need to be feminine to talk rights. That is why I think I never attached that. I never thought of myself as any woman for women. So much as a human person for the rights of women. Because I've lived down here in Africa most of my life. So feminist, no; women's activist, yes." (personal communication, June 2012)

Thus, despite the more contemporary alumnus's discomfort with feminism, the majority of the founding pioneers of WGS in Uganda identified as feminist. I would argue that the connection between a personal interest/commitment to gender equality, women's rights and social justice and the lack of economic enticement is not insignificant. By this I mean that as degrees in WGS have become marketable, degree-seekers' commitment to feminism has declined. This was made clear during my interviews with degree holders, where sixteen out of the nineteen responded negatively

to either the title of feminist or in their definition of feminism. For example, Fuuna stated that he was “not at all” feminist and went on to posit that “to me feminism simply means a group of people trying to get more things...people who have a belief that women are oppressed and therefore they think they should remove any form of oppression towards women” (personal communication, June 2012). Naluyiga also denied any feminist identity stating that “feminism means to me someone who wants to come out and fight all the time and be loud...They are sometimes going too much beyond what is expected of women” (personal communication, June 2012).

### **Politics of Naming**

Be it in terms of individual identity as a feminist or supporter of feminism or of institutional politics as a women’s studies or a gender studies program, the same kind of language-based conflict over the politics of naming can be found across all sectors of WGS history. I address it here to show examples of the ways that naming politics permeate the history of the discipline. WGS was developed in the West as the academic arm of the women’s movement, and as such was initially committed to the goal of women’s liberation (Mama, 1996). While the term “women’s liberation” may not be as reflective of African realities, the connection between scholarship and activism that was so much a part of early American WGS programs can also be seen across the African continent. It is important to understand the larger regional and continental conversation that the School of Women and Gender Studies in Uganda has been engaged in since its founding.

Mary Osirim (2009) asserts that “African women’s conceptions of feminism and gender studies scholarship have been clearly linked to politics, especially to African independence movements and the development of the post-colonial state” (p. 100). Thus we can see that liberation is still a central focus of WGS and I dare to argue that this link is one of the few universals of feminist studies globally. Clearly there are many elements of this debate that run far deeper than a mere game of semantics. The specific choice to use the term “gender studies” over “women’s studies” is a purposeful, political, welcome, and at times unwelcome compromise to accomplish the goals of WGS in the Global South.

While Mansah Prah (1996) rightly states that gender studies and WGS should not be conflated as one and the same within the African context, there are specific political implications for the use of one title over the other. These implications, on occasion, have little to no bearing on the type of work conducted or on the pedagogical practices deployed. Amina Mama (1996) points out that “[t]here is not even much consensus on using the term ‘Women’s and Gender Studies’ which is often jettisoned in favor of ‘gender’ to gain acceptability among the men and allow them to feel and be included” (p. 84). Christine Obbo (1992) asks, “Do we need WGS in Africa?” and emphatically answers, “Yes, we do!” However, she echoes other scholars in their claims that there can be negative associations with the term “women’s and gender studies,” and as such, “[w]e are going to end up calling such courses Gender Studies because some of us feel that ‘gender’ is a sanitized term that does not threaten the powers that be (men)” (p. 2).

The choice to name one department “Gender Studies” and another “Women’s and Gender Studies” does not occur randomly or without consequence. At the University of Natal-Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, faculty interviewed by Debby Bonnin (1996) explained they decided to use “gender studies” based on a need to avoid making the male students and faculty, feel excluded or attacked. Yet, after several years of development in the program, new concerns have been raised. One faculty member stated that “[w]e opted for Gender Studies because we wanted to reach as many students as possible. But we are beginning to feel that ‘gender studies’

has shunted Women's and Gender Studies. Lots of work in gender studies has been taken over by men with all the masses of studies on masculinities. Some people feel that *Women* in WGS must be restored" (p. 391). Again I must reference Obbo's (1992) article, not just because she is a Ugandan scholar, but because she cogently sums up the prevailing argument about African, or at the very least, Ugandan views on WGS naming: "On the whole, it is felt, WGS is what feminists do and gender studies is what level-headed academic women do" (p. 2). This comment highlights the dialogue that permeates the literature on African WGS; dialogue that implies that by undertaking women's studies, a scholar is engaging in radical and "foreign" politics rather than the rational and regionally situated gender studies of "serious" academics.

Yet, it is important that we do not simply dismiss this tension between program titles as a game of politics. Florence Howe (1997) dismisses the use of the title gender studies as a kind of cop-out or way to sneak in feminist literature. However, this neglects to acknowledge the complex theoretical, ideological, and pedagogical shifts that differentiate gender studies from women's studies. While some programs may in fact use gender to satisfy the need to pacify certain institutions, as discussed above, this by no means should be taken to mean that African scholars lack the nuance and understanding of the difference between women's studies and gender studies.

Emmanuel Kisiang'ani (2004), a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa, directly challenges Howe's oversimplification, clearly stating that "...Gender Studies include, but are not synonymous with Women's and Gender Studies" (p. 10). He articulates the complex underpinnings of gender theory by pointing out that gender studies "...is also challenged to critically rethink dominant contemporary conceptions of gender and the notions of sex and sexuality intertwined with it" (p. 19). This is not just a case of interchanging terminology but instead a reflection of the complex task of interrogating the constructions of gender and sex, as well as the geographically specific implications of those constructions. Reflecting the desire to Africanize feminism, women's studies, and gender studies, Kisiang'ani issues a call to action to other African scholars and institutions, asserting that,

[G]ender Studies should not just end at dismantling forms of knowledge authored and authorized by the West. In fact, as we indicated before, gender research should also undertake to highlight the myriad achievements of African men and women in education, art, music, agriculture, sports, medicine, religions, politics and economics, to date." (p. 17)

Thus, we see again the desire to show that theory and academic contributions do not emanate exclusively from the West nor are they accepted without regional interpretations and reformulations.

Richard Ssewakiryanga (2002) states that "[a] term like 'gender' travels a great deal, with a number of different and conflicting meanings and connotations according to the context in which it is used" (p.1). He argues in defense of the need for differentiated curriculum depending on the desire to engage with gender studies or women's studies. And so, we see that "[g]ender politics in post-colonial Africa are deeply contested, within and beyond the minority who might name themselves as feminists" (Mama, 2002, p. 1). In Mama's (1996) signal article on WGS in Africa, she purposely combined "...studies of women, studies by women and studies for women..." because as she conducted her research she found that in Africa there are few curricular differences between women's studies and gender studies programs (p. 3). In fact, she claimed that "...the vast majority of 'Gender Studies' in and on Africa were in fact 'Women's and Gender Studies' insofar

as it was hard to find any studies of men, masculinity, or male power per se” (p. 10). I would challenge that assertion both within the context of the Ugandan case study and within African WGS more broadly.

There have been significant theoretical and curricular developments throughout the continent in regard to gender theory, gender pedagogy, and gender studies curriculum. In the case of WGS in Uganda, the name of the program evolved through “careful research and consultation with faculty, administrators, and donors” (Mwaka, personal communication, June 2012). In 1991, the founding pioneers agreed that the title of "women's studies" situated the department as a program focused on the study of women’s lived realities, research on the status of women, and on the centralization of women’s experiences. Just a year later, however, the faculty agreed that none of the above listed areas of inquiry could be adequately interrogated without the inclusion of courses on masculinity and engagement with cutting-edge gender theories. As such, in 1992, the faculty changed the program name to the Department of Women and Gender Studies in order to give credence and authority to both elements necessary to positively impact the status of women’s lives in Uganda.

## **Conclusion**

The history of WGS in Uganda speaks to the birth of the discipline in sub-Saharan Africa, the role of transnational feminism in the establishment of the discipline in the Global South, and the significance of the United Nations World Conferences on Women in the creation of the oldest WGS program in Africa. From 1991 through 1998, Makerere University’s Department of Women and Gender Studies focused on developing its master’s program. With the name change from the Department of Women’s Studies to the Department of Women and Gender Studies in 1992, the program also incorporated a more gender-sensitive focus that encouraged the study of feminist theory within a specifically African framework, and gender and development issues more broadly. In 1998, the department initiated bachelor’s and doctoral degree programs, both of which have continued to grow. The department showed major growth in 2002 when it hosted the Eighth International Women’s Worlds Conference, both a first for Uganda and for Africa. In preparation for the conference, the Department of Women and Gender Studies moved into its own autonomous building on campus. Finally, in 2011, Makerere University promoted the Department of Women and Gender Studies to the status of a school, becoming the School of Women and Gender Studies under the leadership of its own dean. To date, this is the only school of women’s and gender studies in the world.

## References

- Action for Development. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://new.acfode.org>.
- Ankrah, E. M. B., Peninah D. (1991). Women's Studies Program for Uganda. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(4), 864-869.
- Bonnin, D. (1996). Women's Studies in South Africa. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 24(1/2), 378-399.
- Department of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University. (2002). *Celebrating 10 Years of Existence: Department of Women & Gender Studies, Makerere University*. S. Mukasa & N. B. Tanzarn (Eds.). Kampala, Uganda: (n.p.).
- Howe, F. (1997). "Promises to Keep": Trends in Women's Studies Worldwide. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 25(1/2), 404-421.
- Kasente, D. (2002). Institutionalizing Gender Equality in African Universities: The Case of Women's and Gender Studies at Makerere University. *Feminist Africa*, (1). Retrieved from <http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/feminist-africa/01>
- Mama, A. (1996). *Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s*. Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.
- Mama, A. (2002). Editorial. *Feminist Africa*, (1). Retrieved from <http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/feminist-africa/01>
- Mwaka, V. M. (1996). Women's Studies in Uganda. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 24(1/2), 449-464.
- Namisiko, E., & Kisiang'ang, W. (2004). Decolonizing Gender Studies in Africa. In S. Arnfred, B. Bakare-Yusuf, & W. Kisiang'ang (Eds.), *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies, and Paradigms*. Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.
- Obbo, C. (1992). *The Other Side of Silence: An Argument for Gender Studies*. Paper presented at the Makerere Conference on Strategies for Developing Special Courses in Women and Gender Studies in Eastern and Southern African Universities. Kampala, Uganda.
- Osirim, M. J. (2009). Mobilizing for Change Locally and Globally: African Women as Scholar-Activists in Feminist and Gender Studies. In M. Ndulo & M. Greico (Eds.), *Power, Gender and Social Change in Africa* (pp. 94-111). Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Prah, M. (1996). Women's Studies in Ghana. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 22(1/2), 412-422.
- Sicherman, C. (2005). *Becoming an African University: Makerere 1922-2000*. Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers Ltd.
- Ssewakiryanga, R. (2002). "That Beijing Thing!": Challenging Transnational Feminisms in Kampala, Uganda. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, (54), 16-30.
- Uganda Association of University Women. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://uwauw17.wixsite.com/uauw>.