Knowledge, activism and institutions for Africa's transformation: Key strands in Takyiwaa Manuh's feminist scholarship

Charmaine Pereira

Abstract

This essay examines ways in which selected texts in Takyiwaa Manuh's scholarship treat the themes of knowledge, power and institutions with a focus on their role in Africa's transformation. The range of Manuh's scholarship covered includes her earlier work on how the political power of the Convention People's Party was used to advance Ghanaian women's participation in public affairs and African Unity; her later work on universities as institutions of knowledge production, addressing their relations with the wider society and the project of change and social transformation; as well as her work on women's empowerment in Ghana. The main argument of this essay is that Manuh's feminist work foregrounds the role of knowledge and action in the pursuit of social change, with institutions providing formalised conditions of possibility for the coalescence of knowledge and action in practice. Moreover, whilst Manuh's scholarship is grounded in the realities of Ghanaian women's lives, her work transcends a single national context in its relevance for Gender and Women's Studies and for African Studies. As evident in her involvement in continental and transcontinental research networks, Manuh's scholarship invites us to reflect on the politics of place and context in knowledge production for the African continent and beyond.

Charmaine Pereira (charmainepereira19@gmail.com) is a feminist scholar-activist living and working in Abuja, Nigeria. Her research and writing addresses the gender and sexual politics of violence, feminist thought and practice, and the politics of natural resource extraction in Africa. She has organised and co-ordinated action research on the theme of sexual harassment and sexual violence in Nigerian universities with a view to working on strategies for change. Pereira is the author of *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System* (James Currey/Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 2007) and editor of *Changing Narratives of Sexuality: Contestations, Compliance and Women's Empowerment* (Zed, 2014). She has been an active force in the coalition pushing for the passage of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015 in Nigeria and has coordinated research on implementation of the law. Pereira edited special issue number 22, of the continental scholarly journal *Feminist Africa*, on the theme of 'Feminists Organising – Strategy, Voice, Power' and co-edited FA's issue on 'Extractivism, Resistance, Alternatives'. She is one of the five Editors of *Feminist Africa*.

Résumé

Cet essai examine la manière dont des textes sélectionnés dans l'oeuvre de Takyiwaa Manuh traitent les thèmes de la connaissance, du pouvoir et des institutions en mettant l'accent sur leur rôle dans la transformation de l'Afrique. La gamme d'études de Manuh qui est couverte comprend ses travaux antérieurs sur la façon dont le pouvoir politique du Convention Peoples' Party a été utilisé pour faire progresser la participation des femmes ghanéennes aux affaires publiques et à l'unité africaine; ses travaux ultérieurs sur les universités en tant qu'institutions de production de connaissances, abordant leurs relations avec la société au sens large et le projet de changement et de transformation sociale; ainsi que son travail sur l'autonomisation des femmes au Ghana. L'argument principal de cet essai est que le travail féministe de Manuh met en avant le rôle de la connaissance et de l'action dans la poursuite du changement social, avec des institutions fournissant des conditions formalisées de possibilité pour la fusion des connaissances et de l'action dans la pratique. De plus, alors que l'érudition de Manuh est ancrée dans les réalités de la vie des femmes ghanéennes, son œuvre transcende un contexte national unique dans sa pertinence pour les études sur le genre et les femmes et pour les études africaines. Comme en témoigne son implication dans les réseaux de recherche continentaux et transcontinentaux, l'œuvre de Manuh nous invite à réfléchir sur la politique du lieu et du contexte dans la production de connaissances pour le continent africain et au-delà.

Mots clés: Takyiwaa Manuh, savoir, pouvoir, institutions, genre, féminisme, transformation.

The 10-year Anniversary Conference of the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA)[1] at the University of Ghana, was also dedicated to celebrating the life, works and times of Takyiwaa Manuh. The conference's dual focus on the institution and Manuh, as a key figure in CEGENSA's formation, was particularly apt. It was clear from the occasion that Manuh's work was regarded as canonical in Ghana, but I wondered whether the same was true in other Anglophone countries across Africa. One could not assume that the feminist knowledge produced by authors who were deeply admired in some parts of the continent, circulated similarly elsewhere in Africa. In any case, I wondered, what shapes the formation of a canon of African feminist thought? It is true that the works of certain African feminist authors are highly respected, regularly cited, and generally viewed as influential. These are hallmarks of a canon, yet does the recognition of a few not entail the exclusion of many? Whilst this is certainly a potential pitfall, perhaps the way to address it would be not to deny its possibility but to continually engage with and critique the processes involved in canon formation (see e.g. Graness, 2015). These are ongoing questions, which form the backdrop but are ultimately beyond the scope of this article.

　　Here, I approach the discussion of key themes in Manuh's writing via a method used in literary studies, which addresses canon formation as a matter of course through textual analysis of writers' work. Critical engagement with texts is one important route to canon formation in literary studies (see e.g. Gallagher, 2001). I use textual analysis of selected works in Manuh's oeuvre to highlight the connections in these texts across borders of different kinds – disciplines, sectors, spheres of life. It should be noted that textual analysis is not equivalent to summarising the author's texts; the emphasis instead is on their interpretation and the deliberations informing such interpretations. From this perspective, I draw attention not only to the texts but also the contexts in which they are written. As Carole Boyce-Davies (2017, p. 122) points out in her discussion of the development of African feminist literary criticism, "analysing a text without some consideration of the world with which it has a material relationship is of little social value". This point is just as relevant to critical engagement with nonfictional texts.

　　I begin with an extract from Takyiwaa Manuh's (2007) chapter on 'Doing Gender Work in Ghana' in the provocatively named co-edited collection *Africa After Gender?*

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1 CEGENSA's 10-year Anniversary Conference was held at the University of Ghana, Legon from the 27th to the 29th of October, 2016.

> How has gender become institutionalised around Africa and
> in Ghana? What issues have animated gender activism in
> Ghana? What forms have gender debates in Ghana taken
> and how do they relate to larger concerns of the women's
> movement in Ghana, Africa and globally? [···] I argue that
> whatever its source, gender has become indigenised around
> Africa and Ghana and is being used to chart an agenda for
> social and political transformation [···] There is growing
> autonomy for gender work even as there are divergent
> motivations and understandings of gender work. (Manuh,
> 2007, p. 126)

The extract above distils some of the central concerns in Takyiwaa Manuh's scholarship. These include the question of knowledge, its production, and its relations to activism in a context where feminism in the institutional space of the academy faces numerous challenges in pursuing transformational goals. Manuh's feminist pan-African vision and impetus are evident in her concern with how varied understandings of gender may underpin agendas for transformation in Ghana in *relation* to such debates elsewhere in Africa and globally, whilst simultaneously placing issues of feminist concern in their *local or national context* – as opposed to trying to fit them into frameworks primarily intelligible to those in the Global North. This feminist decolonial approach, which is both intellectual and political, is important precisely for its efforts to produce knowledge about the complexity of gendered power relations and experiences that are grounded in the specificities of African contexts. In this sense, Manuh's work is an important part of Gender Studies in Africa as well as African Studies.

Manuh's (2007) chapter starts by locating "gender work" within a larger continental and global movement of activism aimed at improving the conditions of women. Outlining a historical context for activism around gender in Ghana, Manuh highlights the impact of the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women, the formation of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), the role of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), and the critical importance of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town in strengthening ties among feminists on the continent and in providing a support network for institutionalising gender and women's studies in Africa. Manuh also refers to the various groups and networks organised at national, regional and continental levels to address "women's rights and access to resources, political voice,

participation and power, gender violence, HIV/AIDS, and new technologies such as ICTs" (Manuh, 2007, p. 128). Gender scholars and activists in Africa, Manuh notes, have long been interested in matters of policy as well as practical actions that could improve women's lives.

Manuh's question, "How has gender become institutionalised around Africa and in Ghana?" invites us to ask how feminist studies *might* become institutionalised around Africa. Prior to that, the emphasis on institutionalisation begs the question of why we think institutions are important. I would argue that the significance of institutions is that they provide formalised conditions of possibility for the coalescence of knowledge and action in practice. Mary Douglas, in her book *How Institutions Think* (1986), reminds us that institutions provide structures for remembering and even for knowing. It would appear that the institutionalisation of feminist studies, or gender and women's studies from a feminist perspective, is about gaining formal recognition and support, including resources, for the knowledge and action that flows from the pursuit of a feminist agenda. This is critical when even in progressive pan-African research institutions which promise support for addressing the impacts of unequal gender relations in knowledge production, few male scholars are able to integrate feminist knowledge into their own scholarship (Pereira, 2002). And from the vantage point of African Studies, Akosua Adomako Ampofo (2016) highlights exclusionary practice on the basis of gender and race through the privileging of Eurocentric knowledge and methods, as well as voices from the Global North.

One way by which one can contribute to the strengthening of feminist studies in Africa is through greater reflection and critical engagement with the kinds of feminist knowledge produced by African scholars who are activists. Jane Bennett (2020, p.34), for example, points to ways in which Sylvia Tamale's work, located at the intersections of law, sexuality, culture and gender, "galvaniz[es] debates on the scope of feminist theories and theory's implications for driving continental activist agendas". In this article, I engage in a meta-reflection on ways in which selected texts in Manuh's published repertoire take up the themes of feminist knowledge, activism and action in and through institutions, in the pursuit of social and political transformation. I outline and contextualise three thematic configurations in which knowledge, activism and institutions cohere, presenting Manuh's arguments first before highlighting the specific contributions that she makes to the feminist and African studies literature in these fields. In the process, I discuss my own perspectives on Manuh's scholarship, distinguishing these from Manuh's arguments where necessary. This is inherently a partial perspective – I make no claims to exhaustiveness.

The first thematic configuration addresses the power of ruling political regimes and the relations of women to the state under the Convention People's Party (CPP) and the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). The second thematic configuration highlights the change and the possibilities for transformation in public universities—institutions whose power ostensibly lies in their role of knowledge production—albeit under increasingly constrained conditions. Third is Manuh's work on women's empowerment and what this means in gendered encounters with state bureaucracies. The texts I select to illustrate the second and third thematic configurations are co-authored by Manuh and members of her research team. The collective character of the research points as much to its broad scope as it does to Manuh's willingness to engage other researchers inclusively in her intellectual work. All of this serves to underscore the significance of the themes identified, for feminist work on gender that takes social and political transformation in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, seriously.

I. 'Women, the State and Society'[2] under ruling regimes

Manuh's early works (1991, 1993) examined the ways in which women fared under ruling regimes – across social, economic, political and legal spheres. The two regimes analysed were at differing ends of the political spectrum, the Convention People's Party (CPP) being the party that was expected to usher in a new period of hope and possibility with the end of colonial rule. The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), on the other hand, was a military regime connoting the truncation of democracy and freedom. Both regimes championed women, although in different ways and for different purposes. Manuh's approach in these two book chapters focuses largely on the effects of the ruling regimes' treatment of women, even as she addresses the role of women's organisations in improving women's lives. The emphasis on the impact of the state on women represented a general trend at the time, such as that discussed by Naomi Chazan (1989). By the late 1990s, however, feminist research on the state had shifted its focus towards an examination of how state institutions and practices were gendered, with varying implications for diverse categories of women and men (e.g. Mama, 1998).

In Manuh (1991), "Women and their Organisations during the Convention Peoples' Party Period", she points out how women were not only key players in the events surrounding Kwame Nkrumah's rise to power, but also constituted an important base for the party, the CPP. Manuh documents the various ways

2 This is the start of the title of Manuh's (1993) book chapter, 'Women, the State and Society under the PNDC'.

in which women, as a group, and using a mix of traditional and novel methods, supported Nkrumah and the CPP by working to realise the party's aims and objectives. Nkrumah's militant engagement in the anti-colonial struggle had gained him widespread popularity. Women's support for the CPP was predicated on their having "more to gain from independence", since women "were discriminated against in education, employment and family life, and they had fewer stakes in the maintenance of the colonial state as they were largely unrepresented in its political, social and economic structures" (p. 114).

According to Manuh, the CPP's efforts to improve the conditions of women in the immediate post-independence period represented a site of action linked to both the unravelling of the effects of colonisation and advancing the cause of national (more than women's) liberation. The categories of action which Manuh identifies as critical for the new Ghanaian state to carry out reflect both the interconnectedness of tasks that she views as necessary to improve women's lives after independence as well as the priorities of the CPP. These tasks were:

i. ··· enhancing women's civil and political rights;
ii. educational, social and economic measures aimed at realising the full potential of women in society;
iii. family, marriage and inheritance reform;
iv. organising women centrally to speak with one voice; and
v. women and African Unity (pp. 114–5).

Manuh (1991) further argues that under the CPP, no autonomous women's movement was possible or permitted. The National Council of Ghana Women (NCGW) was the women's wing of the CPP and the umbrella organisation of all Ghanaian women. Even the NCGW, however, failed to mobilise around marriage and inheritance reform; it seemed to view its Party role as more significant, particularly the "monumental and nebulous task of 'nation-building'" (p. 129). Hence the NCGW's emphasis on more educational and employment facilities for women, which was viewed by the Council as enabling women to contribute to national development. Similarly, the provision of day-care centres was premised on the notion that women would thereby be freed to become more efficient workers, and not on the view that such provision might reduce women's domestic load. Overall, the Council did not question the subordinate positions of women in their societies. This was hardly surprising since, as Manuh points out, the Council's very beginnings were not democratic, and they paid little attention to questions of internal democracy and mass participation within the CPP.

The market women who dominated the Council were concerned with furthering their own interests within it, and the Council was the female version of the petty-bourgeois class in the Party, organised to reap the gains of independence. No issues of particular concern to rural women such as access to credit, agricultural extension, services or land were picked up, and even as the Council had branches in the rural areas, it remained an urban phenomenon (Manuh, 1991, p. 130).

Manuh (op cit) argues that a more positive experience for women in the Council was the exposure it afforded women to find out about the conditions of women in other countries. This, she points out, inspired Ghanaian women to challenge the prevailing belief in women's inferiority. Manuh outlines how Nkrumah's commitment to the realisation of African Unity spurred many meetings on this theme, and through contact with other African women and women of African descent, Ghanaian women were connected to the struggle for the liberation and unity of the continent.

Assessing the impact of CPP rule on Ghanaian women's lives, Manuh shows how this was uneven, with some measured successes and notable failures. After flag independence, as Manuh points out, the CPP did enable some women to take up public positions. Such action reflected not only a recognition of women's active roles in the anti-colonial struggle but also a deliberate political effort by the CPP to get more women into public positions. Moreover, new facilities for post-basic education were provided, and discriminatory practices in employment were removed. These new educational and employment openings, however, were unevenly distributed across regions and localities. Younger women were more able to take up the opportunities available and benefitted from changing attitudes towards women and their roles in society. However, older women, between 25–49 years for example, still showed high levels of illiteracy. By the end of the CPP period, women's economic participation was still low and generally concentrated in agricultural and sales/commerce sectors (Manuh, 1991).

Where the CPP failed to address key issues of significance to Ghanaian women, Manuh stresses, was in the sphere of family, marriage and inheritance reform. "This failure arose from the petty-bourgeois character of the party and the contradictions that this engendered." (p.129). The Uniform Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance Bill—an issue of key concern to the majority of women—was not passed into law. Manuh's (1991) examination of the legislation that was enacted—the Maintenance of Children Act—shows that it was beset with

problems. The knotty issues of desertion, neglect, denial of maintenance and property rights—in the small fraction of cases that were eventually heard—were left for the courts to disentangle.

I would argue that the significance of Manuh's work on the CPP lies in her critical reflection on the meaning of 'national liberation' in Ghana, in the wake of anti-colonial struggle and pan-African efforts to unite the continent. Although women joined and fought for national liberation, they still faced discrimination subsequently, in various spheres of life. Manuh shows the limitations of the CPP government's efforts to create openings for women in public positions without addressing dominant constructions of gender in the domestic arena. Her analysis makes clear that contradictions inherent in the CPP's gender politics not only underpinned its male dominated character but also constrained the resistance which the CPP embodied, even on the part of some categories of women involved in nationalist struggles.

Women's relations with the PNDC,[3] a military regime headed by J. J. Rawlings, is the subject of Manuh's (1993) book chapter. In the extract below, Manuh refers to research by Dennis (1987) when outlining the similarities in relations between women and the state under military rule in Nigeria and such relations in Ghana:

> Women have repeatedly come into conflict with successive regimes in their major economic undertakings as they seek to provide for their families, gain wealth, economic independence and autonomy. An anti-women ideology has developed which typically finds expression in restrictive measures and practices in the market place and virulent attacks on the media and popular culture. Unlike Nigeria, however, in Ghana there is the absence of the religious fundamentalism which underlies some of the measures against unmarried women. But there exists the same kind of political fundamentalism which views women's economic activities with resentment and would wish to consign women solely to the home and the care of the children. This political fundamentalism is in turn reinforced by patriarchal ideology within Ghanaian society and its predetermined notions of the proper role of women. As a consequence, Ghanaian women have been accused of immorality, prostitution and other social evils, especially during periods of crisis (Manuh, 1993, pp. 176–177).

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3 Manuh does not explicitly state that the PNDC was a military formation, although this becomes evident later in the chapter.

Manuh (1993) highlights women's positions structurally in the economy, pointing to the significance of the informal sector in the context of structural adjustment. The economic crisis has meant that families cannot subsist on the earnings of husbands and fathers alone. "Women work to provide the means of survival for themselves and their children and to gain some security and some autonomy from their husbands" (p.179). Women are found working mainly in the intermediate and informal sectors, reflecting partly the "slow growth of industrialization and wage-employment possibilities in the Ghanaian economy and women's relative lack of education and other skills compared to men. It is also a reflection of the sexual division of labour which consigns all household duties and tasks to women" (p.179). Manuh thus shows that the options for women's work are not only structured by the nature of the economy but are simultaneously shaped by social relations, particularly those in the domestic arena.

Manuh's (1993) study of the relations between the PNDC and Ghanaian women points to the regime's mix of highly repressive efforts to control market women in particular, combined with ostensibly benign efforts to raise the profile of women more generally. The latter took place most notably through the activities of the 31st December Women's Movement (DWM), headed by Nana Rawlings, wife of the Head of State. Manuh's examination of the state-supported character of the 31st December Women's Movement and its ability to organise women, heralded later studies on the phenomena of First Ladies (Abdullah, 1995) and their gender politics (Mama, 1995). Manuh (1993) concludes her analysis of the DWM by stating that "the questioning of social structures and unequal gender relations are not on the agenda, and the mobilisation of women has mainly served to create another support base for the Government of the PNDC in its quest for legitimacy and stability" (p.192). Thus, the greater surface visibility of certain categories of women by no means signified a destabilisation of existing gendered power relations.

The significance of this text lies in Manuh's insightful analysis of the complex and conflicting gender dynamics of the nation state, tensions that were produced in the wake of colonialism, and the patriarchal authoritarian rule that subsequently ensued under military rule. Contradictions between state policy and practice are highlighted in contestations around the mobilisation of women on the part of state-supported formations, such as the DWM, and between the gender politics of the DWM as opposed to the interests of peasant and working-class women in more broadly located arenas in society.

Interestingly, PNDC rule was also marked by the use of law as a means of bringing about social change. Laws on intestacy, succession, the registration of customary marriage and divorce were proclaimed and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified. Women's activism played a key role in bringing about such change. Manuh (1993, p. 184) states that, "The passage of these laws was a culmination of almost four decades of struggle, negotiation, inertia and final triumph for women's groups and other concerned individuals". In addition, however, there was also the significance of timing. Manuh points to the particular conjuncture at the end of the International Decade for Women in 1985, and the combined efforts of the national machinery for women, the 31st December Women's Movement, as well as the efforts of the few women who were in high positions of state and government. This was an opportune time for the government to be seen to be demonstrating its commitment to international standards.

Legislation, however, could not resolve complexities in gendered social relations, such as the ambiguous status of women and children under legal pluralism. In Manuh's (1997) chapter on 'Wives, Children and Intestate Succession in Ghana', she examines the complexities and contradictions of the conditions giving rise to such legislation. The passage of the Intestate Succession Law of 1985 sought "to resolve some long-standing issues affecting the inheritance of property and the status and rights of wives and children" (Manuh, 1997, p. 77). Regardless of the descent system, matrilineal or patrilineal, wives are not defined as members of their husbands' families and do not have rights to inherit their husband's property. The quote below lays out the multifaceted character of the terrain.

> This generates a number of economic problems for women, as evidenced by the fact that the number of female household heads in Ghana has risen to over 29 percent. There are wide regional differentials in this new pattern of female heads of households. In the three northern regions, which are the most resource-poor and underdeveloped compared to the rest of the country, there are few female heads of households; but in urban areas the female headship rate has risen to 33 percent, compared to 28 percent in the rest of Ghana's rural areas. The economic rights of Ghanaian women as wives have often been ambiguous in matrilineal or patrilineal systems, and the economic status of their children could vary depending upon the type of legal system that regulated their rights. In addition, polygyny within a modern urban context accompanied by an unstable national economy has led many men

to vary their support for wives and children. All of these traditional and changing factors have contributed to problems that necessitated the passage of the Intestate Succession Law of 1985. (Manuh, 1997, p. 79)

The Intestate Succession Law of 1985 was viewed by several stakeholders—churches, traditional authorities and women's groups—as providing a means for the state to disrupt the persistence of decades-long familial and gender inequities that had given rise to economic disadvantage. Manuh states that the law was initially met with approval, particularly from women's organisations and urban women. Yet two problems remained, with regard to the law's social reception. The first was that "There is still no unanimous position [⋯] among the general public regarding the nature of a wife's interest in the property of a divorced or deceased spouse". Secondly, "the extended families of deceased men have not yet reconciled themselves to the requirement that they relinquish property of their children" (Manuh, 1997, p. 78). These problems, Manuh states, highlight the "continuing need for the involvement and vigilance of the state and women's groups in looking at the consequences of the law and monitoring the economic issues that affect the well-being of wives and children" (p.78). It is clear from the above that Manuh envisages active collaboration between the state and women's organisations in the implementation of legislation addressing key aspects of family life.

Beyond this, Manuh argues, law needs to "be more than formalistic statements"; it needs to "become a reference point" for all the stakeholders involved − "women and men as parents, for successors, and for the wider family of an intestate". The state needs to take action to ensure that anyone who wishes to use the law can do so, which presupposes that they understand its content. Educational campaigns are necessary "so that knowledge of the law and its provisions moves into the arena of popular culture". Here we see over and above the connections among law, social relations and economic conditions, Manuh's conception of law as being further articulated with the spheres of education and culture. These interconnections are necessary for any piece of legislation to resonate in people's consciousness as a possible and potentially meaningful zone of action.

It seems to me that a driving force in Manuh's analysis of legislation addressing strategic aspects of gendered social relations is the question of the *scope* of law in bringing about social change. Manuh's approach embodies a theoretical and political perspective in which legal reform does not exist in a bounded sphere that constitutes an end in itself. Its significance for feminists

lies in its *potential* to make a positive and substantive difference to women's lives – a potential that is not inherent in the *existence* of a law. Legislation, whilst being the product of action ultimately propelled by the state, needs to take on board its embeddedness in society in order to be effective.

Moreover, I would argue that Manuh's analytical approach highlights ways in which a law that is aimed at addressing gendered inequities in familial relations is necessarily connected to flux in social relations as well as regionally differentiated economic conditions in a particular political context. Whilst the state divides these arenas into institutionally demarcated and bounded 'sectors', Manuh understands them as various interconnected and mutually dependent spheres of life. What stands out in Manuh's approach is the layering of differing dimensions of lived realities—the social, cultural, economic, political and legal—and how these change over time. Producing feminist knowledge about the significance of laws thus needs to engage this complexity, through deeper understanding of these various interwoven and interdependent dimensions.

II. Changing universities?

The second thematic configuration that I address in Manuh's scholarship is one that highlights change and the possibilities for transformation in public universities – institutions whose power ostensibly lies in their role of knowledge production. In the wake of structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions since the mid-1980s, the system of public university education in many African countries has been seriously eroded. Malgovernance and increasing inequality have led to intensifying struggles for democratisation in the context of state repression, with the exodus of large numbers of scholars from African countries being one of the consequences. The very conception of university education has shifted from one of serving national needs for high-level 'manpower', in the wake of flag independence, to one of university education operating in a free market deregulated system (Sall, 1995; Zeleza, 1997).

From the mid-1990s, a range of governmental and non-governmental actors had begun to show an awakening of interest in the prospects of growth and recovery following greater democratisation in several African countries. A series of case studies on change and transformation in African universities was produced under the auspices of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA) programme, set up by a consortium of four private US foundations – Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. In addition to Ghana,

studies of universities were carried out in Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. The Ghana case study resulted in the book titled *Change and Transformation in Ghana's Publicly Funded Universities*, which was co-authored by Takyiwaa Manuh, Sulley Gariba and Joseph Budu in 2007.

Manuh et al (2007, p. 1) observe that universities have been caught up in the need to forge "new and creative coping mechanisms to reflect changing environments".

> Nearly 20 years of structural adjustment programming at the macro-level (1982 to 2001) have resulted in a mixed menu of reforms in the system and processes of university education. While some of these may have been triggered and sustained by internal pressures within the universities themselves, others have been catalysed by the realities of an external political economy dominated by adjustment, fiscal restraint and Ghana's recent status as a Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC)[4]. It is in this context of an over-arching system of national reforms that a focus on coping strategies, change and transformation of Ghana's publicly funded universities has been adopted. (Manuh et al., 2007, pp. 1-2)

The authors point out that "higher education in Africa generally, and in Ghana in particular, has experienced significant changes, but has not been perceived as transformational" (p.14). Ghana's efforts to craft a development agenda in line with the poverty reduction strategies of the World Bank and other donors has resulted in further expenditure cuts on higher education. The challenge this poses is "to investigate the responses of public universities to their increasing alienation from the process of public policy making" (pp. 14-15).

The specific objectives of the Ghana case study were to: identify the main trends in transformation; analyse the critical path taken in reforming university orientation, governance, content and impacts; document positive practices in areas such as expanding access and equity; address gender equity; examine the question of relevance; how to sustain funding and resource management; and recommend strategies for scaling up best practices in educational transformation, as well as mobilise resources to facilitate Ghanaian universities' sustained growth and development.

The question of how 'transformation' is understood is critical.

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4 The Government of Ghana officially joined the HIPC Initiative in March 2001.

The study takes as its point of departure the circumstances under which the universities' activities interface with the wider society and institutions, and the concomitant effect of that engagement in the establishment of new paradigms for teaching, research and learning. Transformation is thus seen as a dynamic and cyclical process, giving meaning and relevance to both the protagonists of the actions (the universities) and those who demand, benefit from and are affected by them (the society and economy) (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 3).

Here the interconnection between universities and the society at large is central to conceptualising the positioning of universities as well as their responsibilities and potential power to effect transformative change. The framing of transformation as "dynamic and cyclical" points to a recursive relationship, one that could set off a spiralling effect along a given trajectory. At the same time, transformation and change in Ghana's public universities are viewed as not "altogether deliberate", with diverse "origins, motivations and purpose" (p.3). The "changes fostered by ⋯ nascent transformations are still unfolding", and are "characterised as innovations ⋯ new ways of doing things under extremely difficult circumstances ⋯ with the potential for scaling up and expansion" (pp. 3–4). This suggests that the notion of "transformation" of university education is more aspirational than concrete.

A glaring *absence* of transformation, as the authors point out, is evident in

the place of gender in the African intellectual landscape. ⋯ The misogyny on many campuses, the low proportion of female students and the even lower percentage of female academics and administrators across the continent highlight the unequal inclusion of women in education and reinforce the image of many African universities as old boys' networks. Not surprisingly, with few exceptions, female perspectives have not permeated the 'malestream' of scholarship" (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 18).

None of the institutions have equal opportunity units, sexual harassment policies or grievance procedures. Manuh et al. (2007) stress that "the needed transformations in African universities and societies cannot occur without confronting these modern 'traditions' and value systems that denigrate and exploit women and keep them out of scholarship and academia" (p. 19).

In the decade preceding the publication of Manuh et al. (2007), a series of feminist analyses and interventions across the continent had highlighted various dimensions of the oppressive gender and sexual dynamics of institutional and intellectual cultures in universities (e.g. Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1997; Bennett, 2002; Mama, 2003). By 2007, not only was Manuh et al.'s book available but also two issues of *Feminist Africa* on the theme of rethinking universities in Africa as sites of knowledge production (Mama & Barnes, 2007; Barnes & Mama, 2007) were published. Feminist activist research in several parts of the continent continues its efforts to destabilise hierarchies and dichotomies in patriarchal intellectual and institutional cultures, albeit with mixed results (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Barnes & Mama, 2007). More recently, Sylvia Tamale's (2020) groundbreaking book on *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* points to the compelling need to unravel longstanding and ingrained "privileges and oppressions based on European hegemonic notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, spirituality" (p.2) underpinning the British colonial project – privileges and oppressions which shape the (English-speaking) academy in Africa to this day.

Despite the challenges, Manuh et al. (2007) point to the *possibility* of changing oppressive institutional cultures:

> Although institutionalising gender[5] into university culture is a massive undertaking calling for new resources and skills, policy changes, sufficient funding and the evolution of attitudes against deep-seated prejudice and practices, along with a shift in power relations, these impediments can be overcome with the support of the university authorities in a process of transformation. The necessary adjustments, however, entail a paradigm shift on the part of social, political and educational leaders towards the goal of improving life for all Ghanaian citizens equally by acknowledging and addressing inequities wherever they appear (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 143).

From the above, it is clear that such transformation would necessitate the unravelling of *all* bases for social division among Ghanaian women and men, in a manner that couples the advancement of equality with the dismantling of inequity.

Reviewing the case study of higher education in Ghana (Manuh et al., 2007) and that of Nigeria (Pereira, 2007), Amina Mama (2007, p. 118) concludes

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5 Awareness

as follows:

> These two studies demonstrate the diffuse understanding, if not confusion, around the meaning of managerial and administrative "reform" in the African higher education sector. ··· Neither of these studies attempts a critical engagement with the philosophical and intellectual challenges of envisaging the higher education that postcolonial African societies must now develop. (Emphasis added)

Here, Mama is referring to the mainstream orientation towards reform, contesting the notion that it is appropriate to treat managerial and administrative change as equivalent to 'transformation'. The philosophical and intellectual challenges that Mama alludes to, in even envisaging what kind of higher education contemporary African societies should institute, hint at the difficulties of working across multiple borders simultaneously – the borders of states, of societies, of disciplines. This is an ongoing project for feminist intellectuals across the continent. Elsewhere, Mama (2003, p. 122) has challenged the notion that transformation of African higher education is under way at all, pointing out instead that reform efforts "appear to have been pursued in the absence of an adequate situation analysis with regard to prevailing gender inequalities". From a decolonial feminist perspective, Tamale (2020) argues that transforming the African academy requires a suite of integrated changes: fundamentally subverting the institutional ethos, restructuring curricular content and revitalising research production, using liberatory pedagogical approaches, and embracing the plurality of historically alienated and disadvantaged groups across society within the academy.

In their concluding chapter, Manuh et al. (2007, p. 144) point to the complexities in Ghanaian higher education and the socio-political context as having "conditioned choices and shaped the directions of change". The authors observe that,

> The extent and willingness of universities to move beyond routine ways of acting to forge linkages with industry, government and communities will determine the pace of change in the transformation from poverty to increased well-being and improved human capabilities for the broad majority of Ghanaians (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 144).

From their observation of change processes in Ghanaian public universities, the researchers state that "careful planning is needed to bring about any successful change" (p. 150). A key feature of such planning is the need to extend the consultative and participatory character of the process.

The practice whereby strategic planning efforts are assigned to a 'committee' and handled as routine tasks should be reviewed. In its place, teams should be composed of key university members with expertise in strategic planning and motivated by a vision extending beyond operational problems. Negotiating the strategic vision of the university with representatives of key stakeholders is an essential first step. Beyond that, the tasks to be accomplished should be clearly elaborated and the intended results specified. Strategic planning efforts must be engaged with adequate funding and institutional support in order to be completed successfully in a timely manner (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 150).

This perspective on the potential power of universities to effect transformative change arises from the authors' conceptualisation of universities as necessarily embedded in societies, rather than existing in an abstracted sphere, and as having responsibilities to effect change given their power to inform action through knowledge. The idea of using participatory processes to strengthen the interconnections between universities and various stakeholders within the society—industry, government and communities—flows from this perspective on the positioning of universities and their attendant responsibilities. Beyond this, the emphasis on concrete plans and actions to be carried out within a given timeframe is indicative of activist knowledge and experience in efforts to change the status quo. From the institutional space of the academy, this research highlights one of the core concerns of Manuh's scholarship – the production of knowledge that can be used to bring about change that takes gendered and other forms of inequity seriously.

The different ways in which institutions work, and more often do not, is a key focus of Manuh's research. Fostering the critical feminist thinking required to address the complex social flux that constitutes today's concrete realities requires institutions with a broad vision and a willingness to think outside received notions. We need to be able to draw critically on established ideas whilst working towards a future where prevailing social divisions—of gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and others—are dismantled. There are tensions inherent in the dynamic of trying to change the academy from within. Feminists engaged in the politics of intellectual production in academia contest institutional rules that render such production invisible whilst simultaneously drawing upon those rules to legitimise subaltern forms of knowledge, namely, feminist knowledge.

III. The empowerment of women

The question of women's 'empowerment'—and what this means in gendered encounters with state institutions—is the third thematic configuration of knowledge, activism and institutions that I examine in Manuh's work. Drawing on research carried out under the auspices of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment (PWE) research consortium,[6] this section focuses on the theme of 'women's empowerment' as it features in the institutional spaces of the state bureaucracy. Here, we should note that 'empowerment' has become a depoliticised buzzword flaunted by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and others (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall and Brock, 2005). The uptake of the term 'empowerment' by such institutions has flourished even as the space for collective feminist action to challenge the power relations underpinning the global political and economic order has been severely restricted (Batliwala, 2007).

Manuh et al., (2014, p. 37) take up the question of "what it means to be a 'femocrat' in the state bureaucracy, from both insider and outsider perspectives". The researchers, Takyiwaa Manuh and Nana Akua Anyidoho, utilise primary data and the experiences and insights of an insider, Francesca Pobee-Hayford, which were developed whilst Francesca was working at the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC).

> This chapter discusses the possibilities for and challenges in influencing the government and its agencies in the direction of gender equality and women's empowerment. Through Francesca's reflections on her time at MOWAC, we explore the institutional structures that exist to promote gender equality within the Ghanaian state; the understandings within the bureaucracy of what serves to promote women's empowerment and gender equality; the skills and knowledge base required of bureaucrats mandated to promote women's empowerment and gender equality; the room for manoeuvre for self-described feminist policy actors; the extent to which their actions intersect with, support or contradict the work of the broader women's movement in Ghana; and, finally, the possibilities for alliances between femocrats and activists outside of the state towards the goal of women's empowerment (Manuh et al., 2014, pp. 37–38).

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6 The research was carried out across five hubs located in Ghana, Egypt, Bangladesh, Brazil and the United Kingdom. Takyiwaa Manuh directed the West Africa hub, based in Ghana. The international consortium was co-ordinated by Andrea Cornwall when she was at the Institute for Development Studies, at the University of Sussex.

The authors point out that investigating what kind of task it is to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in MOWAC and the state bureaucracy requires taking into account interrelated configurations of global discourses and national policies. These range from the UN World Conferences on Women and their review processes (1975–2010) to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000 by all 192 UN member states. Moreover, Ghana has signed on to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Constitutional provisions enshrine gender equality and protect certain sets of rights for women. Beyond this, the authors highlight the growing strength of the women's movement in Ghana and its determination to hold the state accountable as well as the increasing influence of the women's movement in Africa as key drivers of Ghana's stance on advancing gender equality.

An additional relevant context is the character of the state bureaucracy. Manuh et al., (2014) state that MOWAC's ability to act on the question of women's empowerment and gender equality is shaped largely by the institutional structures established to address such possibilities. The chapter also shows, however, that much depends on what individuals, like Francesca Pobee-Hayford, can make of the space in and around those structures. Francesca's working career in the government bureaucracy began in 1990. After completing a master's degree in Population Studies, she returned to work at the time the government decided to adopt the Affirmative Action Policy Guideline, which stipulated 40 per cent representation of women in positions of public decision-making. The government also issued a directive introducing gender desk officers (GDOs) who were to be part of senior management and influence policymaking in the direction of gender mainstreaming and gender equity. Francesca was appointed as the gender desk officer at the Ministry of Health. Although she was not in senior management, she got the job because of her boss's assumption that, having taken a course in gender and development during her master's degree, she had shown enough knowledge and interest for the position. Most GDOs who were appointed in the wider bureaucracy had been in junior positions, suggesting that the various ministries attached little importance to these roles.

The Ministry of Health had, however, paid for Francesca to attend a short course in gender and health at Manchester University; it was this training that propelled her on her trajectory of becoming a self-identified "femocrat" i.e. "a feminist working within a bureaucracy or working with the state" (p.38).

I am a feminist because, through my studies, I began to appreciate and acquire values of working towards the achievement of women's rights, gender equality, social justice and transformation. [⋯] However, even before becoming a femocrat, as a civil servant/ bureaucrat I would say that I considered myself an outsider, in the sense that I didn't really conform to the norms of the civil service. [⋯] Right from the start of my working life I found myself championing causes, and acting as a spokesperson on behalf of my peers, when issues arose that required taking up with senior management for action to be taken (Manuh et al., 2014, pp. 38–39).

Francesca's reflexivity and articulate expression of her subjective experience provide a unique insight into the challenges of trying to further a feminist agenda from within the bureaucracy. Francesca's personal reflections illuminate the force of values and beliefs (about "women's rights, gender equality, social justice and transformation") when these are coupled with action ("championing causes"), particularly when such action is likely to go against the grain of the prevailing norms of the civil service's institutional culture.

By 2004, Francesca was seconded to MOWAC as the Acting Director of the Department of Women (DOW). "Coming in as the head of the DOW, Francesca's objective was to empower MOWAC, and specifically DOW, to take up the central management role as the primary implementer of the government's gender mainstreaming agenda" (Manuh et al., 2014, p. 42). Francesca's efforts to address this objective involved a number of strategic approaches. These included working within the Department by strengthening institutional structures, and by training staff and building their capacity; trying to shape the gender mainstreaming agenda by seeking to influence key policy actors within and outside the government; and working to build alliances with individuals and groups in civil society, particularly activists working on gender issues, and coalitions of women.

MOWAC's mandate, as described by the sector Minister, is to "initiate and formulate policies and promote gender mainstreaming across all sectors to lead to the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women ⋯" (Dansua 2009, cited by Manuh et al., 2014, p. 43). The authors point out that:

From the minister's statement and from the National Gender and Children Policy launched in 2004 (Government of Ghana, no date), it is clear that MOWAC's main directive is to 'mainstream' gender issues in the workings of other ministries as a way to achieve *gender equality*, a term that is used synonymously with *women's empowerment* in the quote above (Manuh et al., 2014, p. 43, emphasis in the original).

From the above, it appears that the Ministry viewed "women's empowerment" as primarily achievable through bureaucratic means; it was *not* related to either the exercise of women's agency or the subversion of prevailing power relations.

The lack of conceptual clarity was accompanied by institutional shortfalls. According to Francesca, there were several weaknesses in MOWAC. One of these weaknesses was that the Ministry did not fulfil its mandate of formulating policy and engaging stakeholders in its implementation. Moreover, "the 2004 MOWAC gender policy was not developed in a very participatory manner, in part because MOWAC was unable to convene a policy dialogue on the document that could have made it a point of reference for implementing women's empowerment and gender equality priorities within various sectors" (p. 43). The document itself had no clear directives for gender mainstreaming and there was no strategic document and accountability framework accompanying the policy for the purpose of tracking gender equality results.

Manuh et al. (2014, p. 43) show that Francesca was "[s]hut out of the policymaking process at the highest level" and that "there was little opportunity to engage in a discussion about the meaning and usefulness of gender mainstreaming as a means of advancing women's empowerment". As the Acting Director of the DOW, Francesca's job was to implement policy, not formulate it. The partitioning of policy formulation from policy implementation points to the bureaucracy's fragmented, rather than holistic, understanding of policy and its objectives. MOWAC's failure to convene regular annual policy discussions with other units within the government bureaucracy meant that actors outside MOWAC, whether within the bureaucracy or beyond, had little opportunity to influence the shaping of the agenda on women's empowerment.

From its inception, MOWAC had had a fraught relationship with women's rights groups. The latter had protested the formation of a ministry rather than a body with a constitutional mandate to inquire into all levels of government and other institutions. There was also opposition to the linking of women and children within one ministry. Women's rights groups were later involved in public confrontations with the first Minister over her opposition to a bill to prohibit domestic violence, legislation for which they had been advocating for several years (Adomako Ampofo, 2008).

Manuh et al. (2014, p. 49) were interested in "the possibilities of alliance-building by femocrats with individuals and groups working within civil society for similar ends of women's empowerment". MOWAC was supposed to work with civil society organisations (CSOs) and networks of women's groups by meeting

regularly for engagement over policy issues. Such meetings became increasingly infrequent due to lack of resources. Whilst the institutionally fraught relations between MOWAC and women's rights groups would have made alliance-building more difficult from the outset, it was also not easy for Francesca to make alliances with feminists in civil society at an individual level. An important dimension here, the authors point out, is that government bureaucrats seem to operate in a separate sphere from practitioners, activists and researchers in academia. This arises out of differences among these groups "in terms of their mandate, their accountability systems and their incentives structures" (p. 50).

Francesca resigned from MOWAC in mid-2010, after working there for six years. The government's lack of commitment, at all levels, to women's empowerment and gender equality was a major factor influencing her decision. The authors state that Francesca's departure from MOWAC was a significant loss to the bureaucracy. Their concern was MOWAC's subsequent ability to carry out its role as the lead agency in policy making on gender equality and women's empowerment.

> At the beginning of our research on policy discourses, our perception – as members of the women's movement – of government bureaucrats and of MOWAC staff in particular, was jaundiced by the oppositional relationship MOWAC's first minister had set up between the ministry and women's groups, as well as by our understanding of the historical attrition of human resources and skills in the state bureaucracy, as we have described in this chapter. We revised this view in the course of our work and particularly in our interaction with Francesca. Her commitment to her work, coupled with a clear-eyed assessment of the potentials and deficiencies of her department, inspired in us some optimism about the state bureaucracy (Manuh et al., 2014, p. 52).

From the institutional space of a government bureaucracy, Manuh et al. (2014) provide a poignant account of dilemmas and pitfalls faced by a strategically located femocrat in trying to bring about transformational change from within. The research points to strategies used by the femocrat in her political work to promote change within the strictures of the bureaucracy. By combining personal reflections on subjective experience with a context-specific analysis of the political process of everyday bureaucratic life, the authors have deepened our practical understanding of policy work and the scope for change that individual feminists may be able to bring about within such an institutional location.

The unanticipated consequences of the research in terms of changing the authors' perspectives on bureaucrats is worth noting. Francesca's existence as a committed feminist working within the government bureaucracy serves to alert us against institutional essentialism. By this, I am referring to the notion that particular institutional spaces, such as those within the state or government, are essentially, or inevitably, of a particular character — in this instance, devoid of feminists. We should not assume that feminists *cannot* be found in institutional spaces where they are least expected. Addressing the scope for feminist activism within international development organisations, Rosalind Eyben (2014, p. 172) emphasises that "individual agency matters". Her argument is just as relevant to national bureaucracies such as MOWAC: "feminist researchers and civil society activists should not dismiss the efforts of feminists employed within development bureaucracies who struggle to keep women's rights on the […] development agenda" (p. 172).

IV. Concluding thoughts

This article has highlighted the central focus on knowledge, power and action, within and through institutions, in selected texts within Takyiwaa Manuh's oeuvre. The common ground across these texts is women's activism concerning gender inequities and injustice. Manuh's starting point regarding feminist knowledge production is that such knowledge both draws upon activism at different levels—local, national, regional, continental, transcontinental—and can be used to strengthen action. Across her work on gender, politics and statecraft, and on higher education, Manuh engages with women's activism as a zone of feminist knowledge production on women's rights, gender equality and sites of political agency, with the overall goal of social and political transformation.

Manuh's analysis of women's activism and their positioning in relation to a range of institutions—political parties and governments, universities, state bureaucracies—draws attention to the multiple sets of contradiction that women face, within and beyond the institutions. These contradictions are manifested in terms of gender politics, differences between stated institutional aims and practice, and institutional as well as activist orientations to change and the status quo. From the tensions inherent in a ruling regime's understanding of 'national liberation' to the challenges ahead in contemporary efforts to unravel gendered and other forms of injustice, Manuh's perspective emphasises the interdependence of different dimensions of lived realities. This feminist alternative to hegemonic tendencies which partition disciplines, sectors and spheres of life from one another, thus points to the need for activists and institutions to be more intentional in making connections across social, political

and economic arenas—in knowledge production as well as action—in the pursuit of gender and social justice.

The principle articulated in Manuh's (2007, p. 126) opening statement— "whatever its source, gender [⋯] is being used to chart an agenda for social and political transformation"—is a touchstone for feminist researchers and activists across Africa. Whilst Manuh's scholarship is grounded in the realities of Ghanaian women's lives, her involvement in continental and transcontinental research networks necessarily transcends a single national context in its relevance for Gender and Women's Studies, and for African Studies. Takyiwaa Manuh's scholarship plays a pivotal role in inviting us to reflect on the politics of place and context in feminist knowledge production for the African continent and beyond.

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