Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Gender, Place & Culture
A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20

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To cite this article: Isaac Dery (2020) A situated, African understanding of African feminism for men: a Ghanaian narrative, Gender, Place & Culture, 27:12, 1745-1765, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2020.1724896

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1724896

GENDER, PLACE & CULTURE
2020, VOL. 27, NO. 12, 1745–1765
https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1724896

A situated, African understanding of African feminism for men: a Ghanaian narrative

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ABSTRACT

Feminism provides a key analytical space for theory-building and re-centring historically marginalised narratives and epistemologies. However, the preponderance of women in feminist scholarship has been construed by some as meaning that feminism excludes the interest of men. Situated within a critical discourse analysis and drawing on interviews with men and key informant interviews with women, this essay investigates people's attitudes towards feminism in Ghana (with the concomitant discourses around what is African and what is Western). Feminism was largely perceived by most men and women as a dangerously feminising and Western construct, capable of destabilising the cultural exceptionalism of Ghanaian society. However, a few men appear to have embodied 'progressive' thinking about feminism and alternative constructions of masculinity. For such participants, embracing feminism comes at no cost to men and their manhood. They admit that men have benefited from a patriarchal system, which comes with opportunities and privileges; hence, the struggle for a better and gender equitable society continues. They propose the use and adoption of feminism as an important tool to precipitate shifts in how men approach both their relationships with women, and their own masculine identities.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 December 2018
Accepted 15 December 2019

KEYWORDS
Development Studies; feminism; Ghana; gender studies; masculinities; men

Background

> Why didn't you choose a topic with relevance to development studies? What is the matter with you? Development is what we need in moving forward as a country, not gender studies or feminism. Feminism belongs to the West, so let them deal with it, and let's talk about our tradition and culture and the biggest enemy, poverty.

It was Friday morning in Ghana's Upper West Region. I had arrived by bus to start preliminary fieldwork for my doctoral thesis. Doozie a long-time friend and colleague, had agreed to fetch me at the bus terminal in Wa. He teaches

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modules in Development Studies at a public university in Ghana. We were both excited to be meeting again after missing each other for the past year. An excited conversation began right from the bus terminal through to the house. I could see from the happy expression on his face that Doozie was really glad to see me, and we had a lively conversation sharing our news.

After a while Doozie was curious to learn more about my doctoral research. He asked excitedly: 'Man, what area is your research focusing on?' I explained to him that my research could be summarised as everything about men, masculinities, femininities, and gender-based violence (GBV). Doozie looked surprised, even shocked, and seemed at a loss for words. At first, he tried to hide what seemed to be disappointment. With a somewhat forced smile, he asked for clarity: 'What exactly do you seek to achieve with this research?' Then, looking increasingly perturbed, he continued: 'If I understand your research very well, you are studying feminism?' He then continued with the opening quote that I use in this paper.

Doozie strongly believed that research relating to masculinities, femininities, and GBV has no relevance to Ghanaian people's quest for development because such research is based on feminism – and this intellectual project does not 'belong' to their country. Doozie's comments question the legitimacy of a Ghanaian male in researching 'foreign' constructs, such as gender, masculinities, gender-based violence, and feminism. The narrative of Doozie illustrated above is not unique to him. For many men that I interacted with during my ethnographic fieldwork between October 2015 and March 2016 in northwestern Ghana, research on gender was widely understood as potentially threatening and disruptive to the patriarchal social order. Although men's articulations of the potential danger of research on masculinities and gender-based violence conducted by a Ghanaian man may be problematic, such narratives of discomfort and ambiguities offer us rich texts through which men's imaginations of feminism as extremely threatening to 'development', 'tradition', and 'culture' could be unpacked. As feminism is loosely interpreted to be a foreign construct that goes beyond and against local perceptions of 'development', it appears men in particular stand the risk of losing out their cultural privileges and meanings of manhood because they have to overcome their biggest enemy, poverty. Feared by the risk of losing out their privileges associated with dominant notions of masculinity, I argue that most men are likely to develop strong resistance towards feminist discourses.

If Doozie, as an educated, gainfully employed, and urban-based professional man, holds these views on what might count as a worthy research, how might we convince men to understand that feminist-oriented research is not counter-productive to the concept of 'development'? How might we productively engage men to understand and accept the fact that feminism

benefits both men and women in equal fold? Thinking through the narratives articulated by participants, and reflecting on my own academic trajectories, the discussion in this essay suggests that local perceptions of feminism or feminist-oriented research may reproduce narrow understanding of masculinity and femininity within a specific cultural context. While this essay draws largely on interviews with men and few key informant interviews with women, I locate myself within the larger questions and the purposes of feminist research which are both transformative and deconstructive in nature.

The rest of the essay proceeds as follow. I first discuss the importance of involving men and boys in feminist-related work. Second, I outline the progress made by feminist political mobilisation in Ghana, particularly since the early 2000s to date. Following this, I reflect on my own academic trajectories and what it may mean for a 'man' initially trained in development studies to enter a field (i.e., gender studies) dominated by women, especially from the global North. In reflecting on my academic trajectories, I highlight the range of questions, ambivalence, anxiety, trauma, and rejection that confronted me in doing research on masculinities and GBV among adult men in northwestern Ghana. I then outline my research methodology followed by the presentation of the findings. The final section offers concluding remarks.

Risky endeavors? Excluding men and boys from feminist work

Feminism as an academic-political discourse is full of debates, contradictions, and contestations, and is marked by complex identity politics in both the global North and South (Oyěwùmí 1997; Bennett 2010; Tamale 2014; Danaj 2018). Over the years, African feminist theorising and activism have both influenced and brought to the fore, critical debates on gender and intersectional politics (Oyěwùmí 2003; Tamale 2011; Ratele 2013). A shared intellectual commitment within African feminist theorising, writing, and activism is to disrupt the normalisation of specific notions of masculinities and femininities as part and parcel of a conundrum of citizenship and access to citizenship privileges. This critique has been a central theme in postcolonial feminist theorising, pedagogical engagements and activism (Oyěwùmí 2003; McFadden 2005; Mekgwe 2008; Bennett 2010; McClintock 2013; Tamale 2014).

Despite the significant contributions of African feminist politics to concretising and remapping more visibly, the complex lived experiences and struggles of African women in the context of knowledge production and praxis, my sense is that African feminist approaches to theorising (African) men, just like Western feminist approaches, is problematic and potentially exclusionary. Whereas feminism is critical about patriarchal men and what this may mean for the wellbeing of women, most feminists are less interested in criticising women who are also patriarchal. Feminists talk less about women whose

own patriarchal embodiments frustrate feminist struggle for a gender-transformative society. For a long time in the history of African feminism(s), especially in the post-1990 period, there were relatively little attempts to involve men as gendered people in African women's liberation. African feminist thoughts, research and activism are still largely dominated by the women's question. In fact, women's liberation struggles championed by African feminists over the past decades have almost always put women at the forefront of the debate, while simultaneously neglecting men as a critical unit of analysis. This is perhaps understandable because it is widely shown that men are overwhelmingly represented as perpetrators of multiple forms of violence against women due to the range of patriarchal hegemonies that men enjoy in society. However, the danger of neglecting and not speaking enough about the diversity of men is that a significant number of individual men may not be convinced about their role in contributing to develop inclusive feminism.

There is a growing body of scholarship that highlights the importance of dialoguing with boys and men and their constructions of masculinities as part of a broader commitment to propel more progressive imaginations of masculinities (e.g., Ratele 2013, 2014; Dover 2014). The importance of critically engaging men, boys and masculinities has been highlighted in academic and activist work on gender among pro-feminists for many important reasons. For the sake of clarity and the fact that space constraint may not permit any comprehensive review, my interest here is to highlight two main reasons on why we cannot continue to ignore men and masculinities in mainstream feminist politics, especially from the global South.

First, there is less disagreement among masculinity scholars that the patriarchal social order has been challenged and potentially disrupted in most postcolonial African states, particularly in the past three decades or so. Evidence of crisis, disorientation, distress, and despair is a common thread that staples most contemporary scholarship on masculinities and social subjectivities in the continent. The reasons why men and boys are perceived to be in a state of enormous disarray and even powerlessness is variously articulated in the literature. Research continues to highlight that multiple glocalised forces, such as political, economic and labour market transformation, capitalism, and social changes intersect with a constellation of social axes, such as age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and (dis)ability to fuel tremendous shifts in how men and women interact and relate with each other (see Ratele 2014). Dominant understanding within masculinity scholarship suggests that men derive their sense of worth, reputation, and social identity from being successful breadwinners, being employed, and heteronormative relations. Yet the prevailing socioeconomic realities do not allow most men to acquire dominant milestones necessary for fulfilment of the hegemonic version of masculinity of being successful breadwinners.

The second reason is that substantial evidence continues to highlight different ways in which men's entanglement with dominant masculinities profoundly make men vulnerable and significantly expose women to negative acts and behaviours (e.g., Clowes 2013; Ratele 2013). Organisations, such as Sonke Gender Justice and Men Engage and their pro-feminist interventions, have successfully problematised that excluding men, boys, and notions of masculinities from feminist work risk producing limited and unsustainable outcome (e.g., Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012; Greig and Edstrom 2012; Ratele 2014). This stream of scholarship has progressively argued that male bodied people (as fathers, husbands, sons, teachers, and uncles) are overwhelmingly terrified about the turn of events, which indirectly emancipate people gendered as 'women'. Most men are getting increasingly disappointed in themselves as they fail to fathom the possibility of constructively reworking and renegotiating traditionally dominant masculinities amidst the growing changes in the social order. The associated result of this puzzle about what it may mean to be a 'man' manifests in different shades and behaviours, including violence against women and resistance to feminist values. Although the ongoing discussion on how men and boys could be approached, studied, and brought closer to critically understand the implications of dominant constructions of masculinity on men and women, scholars in favour of this body of work point to how and why research, activism, and pragramatic intervention on men and masculinities need to further debates on feminist struggles for liberatory and less oppressive gender regime.

Even as men struggle to make meaning of the range of material and psychosocial assaults launched by global political disorder, colonial legacies, economic and labour market transformation, neoliberal capitalism, and social changes, it may be safe to suggest that most men still hold greater social, economic, symbolic, and political power and cultural hegemony over women in most societies across the world, including Africa. It then makes sense to suggest that dominant notions of masculinity and how such notions reproduce gendered and less equitable power relations between men and women is what is needed urgently in research, activism, and intervention. As I aim to advance an argument for developing a situated, African understanding of feminism for men in this essay, I would suspect that there is some potential in investing energies to critically study men as gendered subjects. Such scholarly intervention could contribute to broader pedagogy on decoloniality of feminism, gender transformation, and men's consciousness thought, at least in Africa. Developing a critical understanding of African feminism for men may mean journeying and dialoguing with men to take more seriously the range of ideological, social, and political biases and stereotypes inherent in men's relationship with women and other men. For any intervention concerned with addressing social injustices and creating opportunities to nurture

more progressive masculinities, men must be at the center of such interventions. Allowing men to reflect on their experiences by listening to themselves and how such reflection might challenge men's resistance to gender equity could be an important feminist method. This approach has the potential to contribute to decolonised African feminism, which privileges the importance of men learning more about patriarchy and how patriarchal injustices and norms affect both men and women. This approach also allows for a critical dialogue on how specific ideologies, practices, and discourses become institutionalised, maintained, expressed, and reproduced in everyday life in specific spaces (Hooks 2000, 2).

The feminist movement in Ghana since 2000

Feminist political mobilisation in Ghana has a rich history, influenced by many factors, such as a long period of militarised governance, local patriarchal customs, lack of strong unionised structures, and most importantly, inadequate access to resources (Adomako Ampofo 2008; Bawa 2018). Operating within a politically hostile space, feminists in Ghana invested energies and sometimes put their lives in extreme danger in giving visibility to women's issues, (re)discovering women's voices and contributions to history and national development and unveiling patriarchy as a deep-seated vice in the struggles for democratising social relations.

In the early 2000s onward, bolstered by Ghana's successful transition into multi-party democracy, Ghanaian feminist mobilisation gained considerable momentum. This period saw the emergence of what appears to be a mainstream feminist movement, spurring renewed energies and interest. The potentially emancipatory appeal of feminism attracted a large audience, most of whom were middle-class women and some men (Adomako Ampofo 2008). With a feminist agenda gaining a strong footing and traversing regional geographies, many Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), faith-based institutions, and other circles of social thinkers joined the feminist trail. This birthed two very important associations simultaneously; namely the Coalition for the Passage of the Domestic Violence Bill, and the Coalition for the Women's Manifesto for Ghana. The two worked collaboratively, as they advanced similar political agendas in fighting for the inclusion of women in national politics and promoting women's access to a fair share of national resources through meaningful political participation and representation. One of the most successful achievements of the two coalitions and Ghanaian feminism in general, was the passage of the Domestic Violence Act 732 in 2007 (Adomako Ampofo 2008; Bawa 2018). It is relevant to emphasise that the success of these coalitions in pushing the feminist frontiers further was seen in the diverse composition of the membership (lawyers, academics,

public servants, workers from various NGOs, human rights activists, development practitioners, etc.). Consequently, there is true strength in diversity, and this has given the Ghanaian feminist forerunners a commanding weight to challenge multiple patriarchies and their manipulative undercurrents, including GBV and other dangerous cultural practices.

Despite what could be described as a remarkable achievement in pushing for greater women's inclusivity into national development processes, there was large-scale resistance and backlash from political and legislative figures (including some women), particularly against the passing of the Domestic Violence Bill (DVB) and most importantly, including the controversial marital rape clause. For example, there was vigorous contestation of the 'marital rape' in the DVB in parliament and the reactions among parliamentarians were extremely mixed. While some argued for the inclusion of the marital clause, most vehemently rejected it. This clause, as enshrined in Ghana's Criminal Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29), gives husbands the right to have sex with their wives without the wives' consent. Considering that parliament as the ultimate body who enacts laws was divided on this controversial clause, the then Minister for Women and Children's Affairs, who was a woman (Hon. Hajia Alima Mahama), was asked to go on a consultative tour in all the regional capitals of Ghana. During her consultative tour, she strongly advocated for the maintenance of the existing marital rape clause in the legislation. The minister used the consultative tour as an opportunity to canvass for grassroots support, especially among traditional leaders and women at the local level, to reject the feminist call for the marital rape clause to be repealed (Adomako Ampofo 2008). Framing her position as a benevolent 'mother of the nation', she argued that she had a cultural obligation to ensure that the Ghanaian culture, tradition, and close-knit family structures are maintained without being disrupted by foreign constructs, such as marital rape (Adomako Ampofo 2008; Bawa 2018, 8). The minister's problematic position should be read within the constrained context in which she found herself as one of the few women ministers in the parliament of Ghana. There was even more general support among men in parliament against repealing the controversial clause. Although the Domestic Violence Act was enacted into law in 2007, the marital rape clause was not repealed in 2007.

I have outlined points suggestive of salient progress made by earlier feminists in Ghana, especially in the early 2000s to date. Despite immense push-back, Ghanaian feminist efforts (in all their diversity) have subjected patriarchal institutions and hegemonic masculinities to well-deserved scrutiny by making violence against women and girls a visible public discourse since the 1990s. Older Ghanaian feminists have become role models who have written and engaged extensively in diverse ways in deepening democracy and broadening the horizons of feminism in Ghanaian society. While

commending the courageous and painstaking work of Ghanaian feminists in furthering the feminist course, current observation among the young generation suggests a rather disappointing narrative. Many men and women of the current generation are unenthusiastic about the idea of feminism, and even less interested in engaging in what could be described as feminist work. This poses the question of whether the Ghanaian field of feminist advocacy and action has become another exclusionary project? Before I proceed to present the main argument of this essay, it is necessary that I offer commentary on the type of methodology that underpins my research.

Methodological framework: Why feminist intersectional methodologies?

While I acknowledge that feminist methodologies are diverse, all feminist-oriented research draws on specific features rooted in the ontology and epistemology of critical knowledge production. Feminist methodological frameworks focus more attention on critical engagement and understanding of lived social realities and subjectivities. Irrespective of which feminist methodological, theoretical, and epistemological lens one adopts in any research, the ultimate goal is to generate relevant and transformative knowledge that might contribute to changing society for both men and women. Therefore, my research is tethered to Kelly's (2013) and Sumner's (2006) argument that what constitutes feminist research is not simply about adding women to the research subjects but producing well-grounded narratives that align with feminist transformational agenda. Even though my research participants were mainly men, what makes my research feminist-inspired lies in the questions I wanted to interrogate. I knew that asking specific questions on violence in a patriarchal context, such as northwestern Ghana in which discussions on GBV are rare, I was likely to cause confusion, discomfort, and mistrust between the men and myself as a local. The meaning of feminist research lies in not only seeking to understand and theorise women's embodied experiences, subjectivities, and oppression, but more importantly, making more visible the 'how' and 'why' women are the primary targets of both overt and subtle forms of violence. I used feminist intersectional methodologies with the aim to expose and deconstruct patriarchies that produce and reinforce unequal and gendered power relationships and dominance within systemic structures. Women's problems, including gender-based violence are deeply rooted within oppressive structures and social systems in which men play critical roles as culturally powerful gatekeepers. Researching men's constructions of masculinities and how this shape their meaning-making of violence in intimate relationships might benefit productively from feminist intersectional lens which privileges notions of gender, economy,

race, social class, culture, sexuality, age, location, and disability. My study was deeply concerned with the discursive socio-political and economic experiences of men living in an economically precarious and underdeveloped context, which is northwestern Ghana, and the discursive meanings that men make of themselves in intimate relationships. Feminist intersectional methodologies serve as a critical entry point, which may bring men closer to understanding and appreciating the harmful consequences of discursive constructions of specific versions of masculinities and femininities in society. In attempting to understand men's own interpretation and meaning-making of their masculinities through a six-month ethnographic fieldwork in the Wa Municipal of northwestern Ghana, I first employed six focus group discussions (FGDs) with an average of six to seven men as discussants and supplemented them with in-depth interviews (IDIs) and personal observations. FGDs offered a critical space for consciousness-raising and individual transformation as discussants shared, validated, contested, and reflected on personal experiences and narratives on masculinities and gender-based violence. I also employed individual interviews with some of the men who successfully completed the FGDs to unpack discourses that were relevant but could not be discussed during the FGDs. In collaboration with local gatekeepers (e.g., the chiefs), adult men between 18 years and above who were willing to speak about their experiences of growing up as men were invited, and subsequently recruited to participate in the study. More men were targeted and recruited to participate in the study because I was interested in gaining a better understanding of the linkages between increasingly widespread discussions about crisis in masculinity occasioned by neoliberal economic restructuring and the possibility of imagining alternative constructions of masculinity among men in northwestern Ghana. The consequences of neoliberal economic policies (e.g., restrictive public sector employment) and the increasing visibility of transformative feminism, I would suspect, have played an important role in shaping notions of the traditional patriarchal figure, who heads a family and performs the role of the breadwinner. Given that preforming the breadwinning role has traditionally been perceived as men's prerogative, especially within patriarchal societies, such as northwestern Ghana, the decline of the patriarchal family man may arguably constitute a loss of masculine dignity for most men than women. Therefore, there is need to engage men from diverse backgrounds to talk about gender performativities in the context of neoliberal economic transformations.

FGDs lasted between one hour while the IDIs lasted for an average of 1.5 hours with the least being 45 min. Both FGDs and IDIs were conducted in Dagaare (local language of participants) and were translated and transcribed by the researcher (a native speaker of Dagaare). Key informant interviews were also held with selected women who were the heads of the following

departments: Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service; Social Welfare; and Department of Gender. Using a social constructionist framework, especially critical discourse analysis, I was concerned about learning more on whether there are opportunities for alternative constructions of masculinity beside violence which was a common thread in the group discussions.

Researching a 'taboo field': What has a man got to do with gender studies?

In terms of culture and gender, I identify myself as a heterosexual Ghanaian man from northwestern Ghana. I grew up in a society in which the patriarchal hegemony of the social category 'man' is seen as legitimately earned and deserved, and the repressive and subordinate position of people gendered as 'women' is treated as fundamental to the 'true' meaning of femininity (Dery 2019). This supposed naturalness of what it may mean to be feminine or masculine is strongly emphasised and nurtured during socialisation for boys and girls (Dery, Fiaveh, and Apusigah 2019). The process of teaching boys and girls that the world can only possibly be seen in binaries is what Robinson (2002) and Foucault (1984) frame as the production of 'epistemological grid' and 'normalising discourse', respectively. These authors argue that the unquestioned way of approaching the social world, supported by a patriarchal system, divides the world into opposites: man versus woman, powerful versus powerless, oppressor versus oppressed.

Building on this theorisation, I argue that one danger is that a particular worldview is privileged which potentially forecloses alternative ways of seeing the world. Part of this danger is that problematic behaviors of 'men', including violence, are likely to be configured in response to this epistemological grid, and the choice of target for such violence is likely to be well-calculated. In the context in which I grew up, there is widespread belief that girls/women make better wives, mothers, and homemakers while boys/men make for better husbands, breadwinners, leaders, and politicians (Adu-Poku 2001; Dery 2019). The process of making 'men' out of 'boys' is problematic as different social agents (in the school, community, peers, and family) always encourage boys to pursue behaviors that are masculine while remaining invulnerable (Dery and Ganle 2019). Girls are also taught to aspire for qualities, such as docility, dependent, submissiveness, sexual attractiveness, and good wifely practices (see Connell 1995; Dery, Fiaveh, and Apusigah 2019). Men and women are traditionally marked to occupy starkly different spaces as well as to perform different roles and duties in order to gain social validity as masculine and feminine people.

Within this epistemology, I am positioned as a dominant beneficiary of patriarchal power and male dominance either directly or symbolically. Given all this 'baggage' that boys potentially carry as they become 'men', how can they create a position of legitimacy and authenticity as feminist activists and scholars? How might a male bodied person like me who have benefited from an array of patriarchal privileges support feminist struggle for gender transformative society; a society where boys and girls, men and women are treated fairly and equally? What legitimacy, then, do I have as a man researching what I traditionally benefit from in my social position as a man? My legitimacy, I argue, is found in re-positioning myself among gender-critical thinkers whose work is thoroughly grounded in building strong and progressive allies with a feminist agenda. My interest is also nurtured by the ethics of listening, encouraging, and educating men on issues that women are struggling with and the realities that prevent women from flourishing. Men cannot self-identify themselves as 'black male feminist', 'feminist' or '(pro)feminist', if they do not actively try to help reduce the hostilities and struggles that women face across different spaces daily (Adu-Poku 2001, Ratele 2013, Chiweshe 2018).

Initially, I had a background in Development Studies at the undergraduate level in Ghana. After my undergraduate studies, I gained admission to read Gender Studies at an overseas institution. When I told my friends and school mates (both men and women) that I was going overseas to pursue a program in gender studies, the response was universal perplexity. Some were inquisitive as to why a man trained in development studies would seek to enter a field dominated by women, especially from the global North. Why gender studies in the first place? The questions that followed were always, 'Are there not any 'better' programs to read than gender, say Development Studies, Economics, Political Science, Law?'; and 'Did your grades only qualify you for a Gender Studies programme?' Some even feared that I was going to be brainwashed into Western feminist thinking. I consulted some senior men academics on this dilemma, but I became even more confused and disheartened as my choice of programme was roundly criticised. I was labelled with different derogatory names as various academics tried to put me off entering a gender studies programme. The comments from my senior colleagues and peers should be contextualised as belonging within a larger national, institutional, and intellectual resistance which frames gender, or any discourse closely related to gender, as a 'Western' and an 'unimportant' topic. The most immediate manifestation of these concerns is the unconscious but crucial role that people play in shaping and reproducing gendered fields.

The concerns of my friends are also strongly linked to dominant notions of masculinity and femininity which dictate that 'real men' demonstrate

sufficient interest in acquiring knowledge in 'hard' and 'better' fields, such as Economics, Political Sciences, Development Studies, Law, etc. In fact, such concerns do not only suggest that gender studies were strongly perceived to be a 'taboo' field, but it is demeaning for a man to pursue a programme in gender. Arguably, men are willing to identify themselves with 'Lawyers', 'Development experts', 'Economists', 'Political Scientists', and nobody is willing to associate himself with a 'Gender scholar'. The advocates of this position fail to see, however, that the fundamentals of all the so-called 'good' and 'hard' subjects are linked to gender studies.

I was a naïve and zealous feminist after my Master's degree, full of new knowledge that I wanted to share evangelically with the world. However, then I had some experiences that took the wind out of my sails and showed me that it is not all that simple. Life is more complicated, and I have learned that there is good reason why it can be hard for some men to hear about feminism or change their ways of thinking about feminist discourses. Men should form feminist alliances to curtail the damaging consequences of patriarchy, not least because patriarchy has negative effects on men as well as on women. My position has always been that men need to talk about patriarchy as much as women do. Men should not be afraid or discouraged to talk about patriarchy and how patriarchal norms and practices structure their lives. By taking patriarchy more seriously, men potentially open themselves up to seeing other sides of their masculinities, and subsequently, the need to renounce some patriarchal values, practices, and norms. By doing this, men are more likely to realise the currency of feminism towards liberating masculinities and developing democratic relationships.

While men constantly reminded me of my position as a potential traitor to patriarchal politics, I have no reason to complain or begrudge their comments. I have played a role in perpetuating a system which equates manhood with power, authority and dominance. I understand that any attempt that is perceived to threaten the stability of these supposedly bona fide rights of men is seen as an unwelcome and foreign intervention. This is part of what it may mean to do gender-critical research from 'within' the category of people who refuse to see their behavior as problematic.

Masculinity and feminism as odd bed fellows

Having enrolled for my PhD program and defended my research proposal in a South African university, it was time to return to Ghana to collect empirical data. During my fieldwork with men (18 years and older) on masculinities and GBV in northwestern Ghana, most people with whom I initially interacted reminded me of my past frustration and traumatic experiences. Most people expressed strong scepticism and apprehension about what could

have informed my choice of the research topic. GBV is the least discussed and most taken-for granted topic in this part of Ghana (Dery and Diedong 2014), and any research which has the potential of bringing violence out into the open for discussion is likely to be resisted.

Rufus, an unemployed graduate, shared this:

> In the first place, I do not understand why you, a man, should be studying gender. Why? Men like you should be talking about more important things like talking to the government about how men are unemployed. What is feminism when you're struggling to provide for your family as a man?

Abram, a graduate casual worker, suggested that:

> Feminism is all about women's empowerment and gender equality. Why won't feminists also talk about men's problems? I want to ask you [the researcher], are men without problems? Men equally have problems feeding their families and nobody [feminist] talks about it. Therefore, I hate feminism … kind of lopsided.

Moses illustrated the unfairness of feminism further:

> Today, more is talked about women than men. Gender equality is all about women. You see many men remaining unemployed and many of their female colleagues changing jobs. Do we have feminism for men too? My culture demands that as a man, I must provide for my family. Here is the case I am unemployed for God knows how long and you want me to talk about feminism. Take your feminism and give men jobs.

What is the value of feminism in a context of poverty and underdevelopment? Of what value, then, is feminism to an unemployed (African) man whose sense of dignity is at stake should he fail to live up to dominant mandates of masculinity? How might one convince ordinary men in this part of the world that feminism means a lot of good to men as much as women? The ideas contained in the argument raised above relate to the struggle between feminism and patriarchy in the context of people's real lives in poor communities and daily survival struggles. How might one theorize feminism's role in a context in which concerns of marginality exist within patriarchal hegemony? Participants, such as Rufus, Moses, and Abram, are passionate about meeting their patriarchal roles as diligent breadwinners. They are critical about the social cost of not being able to maintain their reputation and image as men by societal standards. Men live in a society where the epistemological grid that binds dominant notions of masculinity and femininity dictates that a man's ability to provide for his family is a critical signifier of successful masculinity. The embodied anger of these men and their hostility to feminism (although I never mentioned the term 'feminism') resonate very much with many other men with whom I interacted during the fieldwork. Their anger and sense of disillusionment speak to a common discourse: the patriarchal underpinnings of masculinity within a capitalist-driven world order.

Regrettably, the currency of feminism and gender equality is likely to be undermined by some men, especially when such men are young and heterosexual. If employment is idealised as epistemologically constitutive of successful masculinity, then gaining access to employment becomes an important mode of demonstrating and asserting masculinity. This idealisation of masculinity as structured by employment is problematic, especially in a context in which unemployment is high. This becomes worrying when men perceive that feminism is denying men or taking away what is naturally due them through the notion of gender equality. The bottom line is that men are differently located in society with varying needs. In a situation in which men are feeling denied of their masculine entitlement, any attempt that has the potential of shifting the boundaries further is likely to elicit resistance. In addition to this potential danger, it becomes harder for unemployed men to embrace feminism, because it is perceived to threaten their (already precarious) role as breadwinners.

However, the views of men were not uniform, and contestations were evident. For example, Abass, a gainfully employed man, contested the allegation that feminism is unfair to men and their manhood. He explains:

> For me, I support feminism. I became supportive of feminism because our Ghanaian culture has a feminist deficit, and the struggles of women … our mothers, wives and sisters are getting worse each day. We need feminism to move forward as a nation, as men and women. As a man you don't lose a single hair by being supportive of feminist agenda. In actual sense, feminism brings mutual respect, joy, and dignity in your home.

Boniface, a professional teacher, also supports this claim:

> Feminism is about fighting inequalities. Feminism gives voice to women and also liberates men. For example, when you [a man] assist your wife to cook, you will always eat on time. When you support your wife in the household chores, your family will also be peaceful.

It is worth noting that both of these men who appear to have embodied 'progressive' thinking about feminism are employed. For participants, such as Abass and Boniface, embracing feminism comes at no cost to men and their manhood. It is about balancing socially structured advantages of men with the mounting disadvantages and struggles of women. They admit that men have benefited from a skewed patriarchal system in the form of opportunities and privileges; hence, the struggle for a better and gender equitable society continues. They propose the use and adoption of feminism as an important tool to precipitate shifts in how men approach both their relationships with women, and their own masculine identities. In fact, feminism contributes to an enhanced masculine identity because there is a sense of mutual respect and dignity. Men embracing feminism means embracing peaceful and democratic masculinities. Men should not resent feminism, because feminism equally

liberates men from questionable behaviors in their relationships (Adu-Poku 2001; Ratele 2013). While it is extremely hard to point out what might have influenced their 'progressive' thinking on feminism, it is possible to suspect that employment could be a key ingredient that gives them the 'luxury' to entertain egalitarian ideals without feeling threatened. Employment could be a necessary factor that shapes men's positive reactions to feminism. However, employment is not a sufficient variable in influencing progressive ideas about feminism as Doozie's comments in the opening paragraph suggest.

Who is an African feminist and what does African feminism seeks to achieve?

African feminism as defined by Davies and Graves (1986, 8) and echoed by Bawa (2018, 2-3) is a strand of feminist thought that

> recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal *[disrupting]* of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. African feminism is not antagonistic to *African men* but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all African peoples. (emphasis added)

Other critical feminist theorists across the world, such as Hooks (1984), Moss (2002), Snitow (2015), and Danaj (2018), argue that the basic principle of feminism is to fight all forms of heteropatriarchal dominations, discriminations, and sexist oppression and this does not aim to preclude the interest of men. Ratele (2013) has maintained that feminism is also about working against an oppressive society in order to effect durable and transformative change which ultimately benefits men as gendered subjects.

The above perspectives make it clear that men can and should be feminists and supporters of women's courses. However, my position and intentions were constantly questioned by people. With a softly nurtured smile on her face in a poorly ventilated office, Angela, a middle aged, urban-based professional woman, who works with the government department on gender, shared her thoughts and ambivalence on working to support women's struggles and feminism. Her body language suggested a strong sense of scepticism as to how a man could convincingly speak against the very problems that men perpetrate in society every day. Angela explained:

> Wow (looking surprised), a man researching violence, interesting! You might as well be a feminist! Look here, I am not a feminist, I am women's rights activist. But if I must be frank with you, you know you men are the problem to women. Men are violent and heartless to women. We see this on a daily basis. My office is currently handling a violent case involving a man and his wife. Men are just something!

Operating within a position of knowledge and authority, Angela pathologizes all men as being violent and 'heartless'. She implies that all men enjoy

equally the patriarchal hegemony of society. Her statement constructs violence as a natural expression of masculinity. Angela draws on an essentialised discourse to frame all men as problematically violent, and women as helpless victims of violent masculinities. She constructs human beings into two binaries: men and women. These notions of gender binaries allow her to delineate specific issues, such as violence as a natural problem of men. How exactly has she arrived at this conclusion? By this case, and in her experience as a social worker, she is questioning the legitimacy of men like me in representing and speaking for the multiplicities of women's lived experiences, especially with regard to gendered violence (because as a man, I am part of the problem). The sentence 'You might as well be a feminist!' speaks to this perceived illegitimacy. Fundamentally, this statement suggests that only feminists should be interested in issues that affect women; and any man who does not identify himself as such has no business talking about women's issues. She puts it to me that I should have been aware that men are a problematic category who constantly oppresses women ('you know you men are the problem').

Angela is caught in an unhelpful, self-contradictory ideological dilemma. She positions herself as women's rights activist and at the same time, she finds it extremely difficult to call herself a feminist. She is frank in her assertion that she is 'not a feminist'. Angela's position has similarities with that of the Minister for Women and Children's Affairs who was supposedly representing the interests of women, while at the same time distancing herself from the label 'feminist'. Similar concerns have been raised by Bawa (2018) whose findings demonstrated how some Ghanaian women who support the struggles of their fellow women are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists.

A sense of caveat thus emerges from the narrative of Angela and her own potential biases in offering a fair and non-judgmental response to both male and female victims of GBV. Her position reproduces a particular frame of knowing which situates men as violence perpetrators and women as oppressed (Robinson 2002, 151). Her mandate as a social worker (enshrined in the national constitution of Ghana) is to offer unbiased, non-judgmental, apolitical, and inclusive responses to all victims of violence irrespective of their gender, sexuality, class, religion, and age. However, her ability to fulfil this role appears to be compromised. Would Angela be able and willing to listen to a man who has been violated by his wife or any other person? She attempts to reproduce a cultural discourse on a version of masculinity which positions all men as being physically strong, assertive, dominant, powerful, and beneficiaries of patriarchal privileges (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). All men are patriarchal, myself included, and all patriarchies benefit men and disadvantage women. She fails to recognise that not all men have

equal access to the patriarchal privileges and that some men are victims of patriarchy (Robinson 2002, 144).

Women too can be patriarchal much like men. Angela remains uncritical about her own privileged position as an educated, gainfully employed, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual woman and how this has given her the authority to question the behaviours of men. Her privileged position has given her the opportunity to paint all men as bad and 'heartless'. She fails to reflect on the reality that some women also abuse men and other women, especially housemaids and junior colleagues (see Zeray and Haileselassie 2015).

Angela makes her claim within a particular regime of knowledge and agency at two levels. First, she speaks from the point of view of an individual heterosexually married woman who thinks that women are unduly oppressed by 'heartless' men. Second, she speaks with an institutional voice, agency, and authority as a person who works with an authorised public department that spearheads gender issues, including GBV. How might we move beyond this epistemic and methodologically weak perspective to a thoroughly-grounded, theoretically rich, and intersectionally nuanced understanding of masculinities, femininities, and violence? How might we understand the complexity of male violence in a context where conditions of poverty are high, and most women depend on husbands for economic livelihood? How might men themselves process and appreciate democratic relationships when most men remain unemployed or significantly underemployed, yet feel obligated to fulfil their patriarchal duty as breadwinners? To successfully engage with these questions, we need to call for a critical understanding of the context in which these questions are being raised and their relation to the epistemological grid that divides masculinities and femininities (Robinson 2002). Our ability to develop an African-centered engagement with the problematic behaviours of men holds some potential in deconstructing problematic notions of masculinities. At the same time, our engagement needs to be thoroughly grounded and sensitive to cultural realities in ways that offer non-threatening opportunities for greater involvement of men in the change process. To do this, I suggest we develop frameworks that problematise things done by men which hurt women, children and men themselves, by creating appropriate opportunities for men to reconfigure and embrace alternative masculinities.

Conclusion

A common thread throughout this essay has been Foucault's perspective on discourse and knowledge. Foucault theorises discourse to mean the set of 'meanings, images and statements' which are taken collectively to construct dominant knowledges in a specific way. The process of knowledge

production, as revealed in this essay, is politically edged by the 'multiplicity of discursive elements' (Foucault 1984, 100), such as gender, race, religion, sexuality, power, politics, economy, and geography. The way in which people negotiate, interact, and understand specific topics within the 'multiplicity of discursive elements' shape the ways in which we produce what is taken as legitimate knowledge and what is not. I argue that the discursive construction and production of knowledge influence how people learn to perceive specific academic projects as desirably masculine or feminine.

The analysis also resonates very much with Foucault's theorisation of the 'normalising discourse'. Throughout the essay, I have attempted to foreground how specific discourses and norms become deeply normalised and unquestioned. The norms which are internalised are highly gender differentiated and culturally policed. Men are understood to be breadwinners; failure to conform to this cultural ideal is likely to attract social penalty in the form of stigma. By contrast, other discourses are rejected as being 'alien' and 'inappropriate'. We see participants depicting feminism as a 'foreign' discourse which has no relevance to the Ghanaian culture and tradition. Representing feminist values as a cultural imposition (linked to patterns of colonial domination) makes it difficult for men to support gender egalitarian discourses, such as the emancipation and public visibility of women. Even though the phrase 'masculine crisis' was not used directly, it seems clear that some men talk about masculinities being disturbed and destabilised by a system which favors women. In order to move away from men being seen as the victims of a feminist diet of gender equality, I suggest it is more helpful to encourage men to see these social transformations as opportunities to learn and develop a culture of masculinity rooted in less dominant and more progressive masculinities. This should be seen as a process rather than a once-off activity to be achieved by men.

From the concerns raised in this essay, it is clear that targeting development interventions only at women is likely to be counterproductive. When men feel that they are being excluded, victimised, and their masculinity significantly threatened in the family and community, some men are more likely to resist a feminist agenda. While the narratives illustrated above do not represent the views of all men, there are useful lessons to learn from them. Men's narratives and fears on the feminist agenda of gender equality point to one important thing: both men and women have their unique set of socio-cultural problems to wrestle with. In a context where men may find it extremely difficult and heavily alienating to navigate difficult socioeconomic circumstances, an African-situated feminist agenda is conscious of, and sensitive to, both men's and women's needs, subjectivities, and struggles in order not to further alienate men. This should not mean that the struggles of women be sacrificed in order to address the needs of men; rather, a

complementary approach is being proposed. When men are unemployed and their position as breadwinners is threatened, there may be little incentive to embrace feminism as illustrated in this essay.

I have also demonstrated how participants' narratives are strongly intersected by durable systems of gendered inequalities, which are so strong and prevalent. These systems of gender inequalities reproduce resistance to deliberations capable of challenging the system. We see this resistance clearly articulated in the way that terms, such as 'gender studies' and 'feminism' invoked discomfort among most participants. They invoked discomfort because participants interpreted them to be troubling to the nourishment and existence of Ghanaian tradition and culture. This theme also speaks to what it means to do gender studies as a feminist African man. Participants' narratives pointed to the gendering of academic disciplines, and the extreme unease that it causes people (both men and women) when a man does gender studies in northwestern Ghana. Participants' uneasiness is also linked to dominant notions masculinities and femininities where issues of status/prestige/'hardness' of the discipline [how apt!] are well emphasized. To discuss the relationship between Development Studies and Gender Studies in Ghana is to discuss about masculinities and femininities in the academic realm. Consequently, men who choose to follow the 'feminine' path are judged harshly for being non-conforming hence a threat to the masculine status quo.

Deconstructing the problematic behaviours of men requires a multisectoral and non-discriminatory approach which involves men and women at different levels in different capacities as close allies. To do this, I propose the development and adoption of African (situated) feminism for men, which is built on an inclusive, collaborative, and transformative agenda. Male violence cannot be reduced or eliminated if men who are non-violent do not engage with their violent peers toward reworking problematic masculinities.

Acknowledgement

I thank my respondents for warmly welcoming and sharing with me their thoughts. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their critically useful comments/suggestions. My appreciation also goes to the editors of the journal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Funding for this study was part of a doctoral fellowship supported by the Social Science Research Council's Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellowship, with funds

provided by Carnegie Corporation of New York. However, the funder did not contribute to the design, data collection, analysis and write of this manuscript.

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