Knowledge production, critique and peer review in feminist publishing: reflections from *Agenda*

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Abstract

We consider how *Agenda*, a feminist journal located in the Global South, and Africa specifically, mediates and balances the demands of peer-reviewed and peer-sanctioned knowledge production with the requisite gender, race and space/place equality in the context of mechanisms that often privilege particular ways of knowing. The article addresses the following questions: What forces inhibit and marginalise women's voices generally, and black women's voices in particular, from feminist knowledge production and dissemination? How do we sustain our feminist positioning and critique in publishing in an environment where gender equality in the various socioeconomic spheres of life remains elusive and where gender violence against women is rife, and this in the context of 'scholarly' peer review? In particular, how do we ensure that the voices of those most marginalised by these inequalities and social forces are heard in ways that matter – and, indeed, count – in scholarly publishing? Informing these questions is our argument that it is not simply the quantitative dimension related to scholars of the south that matters in terms of how many get published, but also the qualitative dimension in respect of who gets published, who has access to publications, and what limitations and challenges exist to address this.

Keywords: *Agenda*, feminist publishing, knowledge production, peer review, scholarship, South

> 'I want to belong to an inspiring community of writers and express myself as a young black woman in South Africa. I want to write in ways beyond just the academic' Welile Tembe (2004: 129)

Introduction

In the current environment of 'publish or perish' that permeates and pervades higher education and research institutions in the South African and international contexts, academics and researchers are increasingly under pressure to produce more quality publications. With excellence being the holy grail of academic life, such publications have to be in peer-reviewed journals – particularly those with a recognised high impact factor. Impact is defined by the average number of citations to articles, which is used as proxy for the importance of a journal. This process, in turn, is determined by a specific epistemic relationship underpinning peer review as one of the key components of scientific communication. The idea and meaning of peer review (colloquially known as refereeing) are usually shorthand for quality control. Peer review is a process which entails assessment, evaluation, critique and ultimately decision making related to the selection or rejection of a manuscript (Eisenhart 2002; Hames 2007; Harnad 1982; Thomson and Kamler 2013). Put theoretically, peer review has been socially, politically and intellectually constructed, confirming that this form of professional practice in science and the humanities embodies 'the principle of continuous critique' as a gatekeeping exercise in scientific publishing, to determine professional approbation or disrepute. While quality control is an important measure, other factors have, over

time, come to impact and define peer-review processes. Hirschauer (2002: 72), for example, makes a compelling case to also consider, beyond the normative functions, some key social functions of peer review which, in his analysis, become more apparent when a manuscript is rejected. In turn, academic journals are evermore faced with the challenges of diversity and representivity, in order to include, for instance, alternative voices in their publishing, particularly with respect to the race, gender, nationality and geographic location (among others) of the authors.

We have approached this argument as three authors with our own individual, varied and deep histories across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, profession and indeed life, along with other personal experiences. A common denominator and purpose shaping our argument is that we all bring experiences as members of the editorial collective of *Agenda*, a peer-reviewed feminist journal located in South Africa, with a continental and global reach and brief.

As we motivate, peer review has a direct bearing on relations between the social dimensions of science, and the circulation and production of knowledge (Gibbons, Limoges and Nowotny et al. 1994; McDermott 1994; Somekh and Schwandt 2007). In other words, implied deeper meanings are embedded by the knowledge produced, that reflect the circuits of power (Downs 2011), contestations and struggles of which feminism is one example (class analysis within Marxism could be another). This is a point that Haraway (1998) interrogates in her argument that knowledge production should be examined from the perspectives of the struggles among the different groups constituting a society. These ideas have been elegantly preceded in the work of Sandra Harding in *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives* (1991) and its precursor, *The science question in feminism* (1986), providing an analysis of feminist theories on how we know and what we know. In the former, Harding proposes that an examination of the practice of science is important for understanding the impact of the values underpinning disciplines and ideas within their historical context. More importantly, this implies that knowledge production is always about knowing, a transitive verb always in flux, descriptive and incomplete (Conway 2004), with direct link to a canon (codified and published knowledge). The inherent intent and idea of canon formation in the biblical sense to distinguish the authoritative (inspired and true) from the apocryphal (false and untrue) has a relation to *origin* and *value*, as to what holds as authentic in a given tradition of writing, as opposed to what should be considered sub-standard and therefore needs to be excluded. Explaining its meaning, Macey (2000: 56) indicates that 'as a canon is necessarily exclusive, demands for its revision often take the form of a demand that it should be expanded to include works by authors from minority or marginalized groups'. Similarly, in this task, and in their quest to maintain high quality in scholarship (and arguably as a form of gatekeeping), academic journals rely on peer review in the evaluation, selection and inclusion of particular voices in order to conform to a particular set of values, ideas and authority which is representative of each journal. Journals pursue this to ensure that manuscripts ultimately accepted vis-à-vis the peer review process confirm a variety of multifaceted power processes underpinning a final endorsement for publication: *Who* is the writer, *what* does the writer say, what is the writer not saying, and what knowledge chains are endorsed?

Within this context, various critiques of peer review in knowledge production and publishing have emerged (Falabella Luco, Marilef and Maurizi 2009a; Gould 2012; Lamont 2009; Lu 2011; Shatz 2004). To illustrate, Falabella Luco et al. (2009a) investigated the international distribution of published articles in six high-impact sexual and reproductive health rights, gender and sexuality

journals. Their findings support the notion that there is an unequal distribution of power in knowledge production and dissemination (including publishing) between the North and the South, and according to other markers of identity (such as gender, nationality and geographic location). Our argument also emphasises two facets of this complex divide: 1) that within much of northern scholarship there has been significant homogenisation, with the tendency to be indebted to the promotion of canonical scholars, while remaining unaware or oblivious (perhaps even ignorant) of underrepresented voices; and 2) that knowledge production is consequently tilted in such a way that it enhances the politics of skewed citationality. Authoritative voices on particular subjects are the ones whose peer-reviewed works form the basis and reference point of what are considered founding ideas in a field. In effect, those who remain published (and here the so-called impact factor counts because of citationality) are ultimately the authors who themselves gate-keep those who are published and those who are not.

In addressing the three questions – *Who* writes about whom? *Where* are the resources for knowledge production in relation to the location of the journals? - and *Who* decides what knowledge is of most value in terms of editorial board membership of journals, the study by Falabella Luco et al. (2009a) found that English-speaking countries dominate: the United States of America (US), followed by the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. According to these authors, among others, researchers from the 'south' face three main obstacles to publishing in leading international journals: the pre-eminence of academic English; isolation from discursive communities; and the marginalisation of locally produced knowledge as non-academic (Falabella Luco cited in Moletsane 2012). This tends to marginalise 'southern' voices in knowledge production and epistemologies, and skews debates in these fields in favour of northern and mostly English-speaking voices.

In South Africa, in addition to the above, the history of apartheid and racial (and gender and social class) inequality has meant that black scholars and researchers - and black African women in particular – have tended to be marginalised from knowledge production and publishing locally. In addition, they have been unable to effectively participate in international discourse communities which are often dominated by academics and scholars from the north. While the country has few resources for knowledge production (research and publishing) compared to the US, the UK and Australia, the distribution of the voices that are affirmed through local publishing is uneven. For example, Ligthelm and Koekemoer (2009) cite findings from a study by Kapp and Albertyn (2007) which, following international trends, found that the editors of 73 accredited journals in South Africa reported a very high rejection rate of submitted articles. Critics have noted that due to historical reasons, white scholars generally dominate the journals. In particular, white women dominate in the fields of gender, sexuality and sexual reproductive health and rights – the very fields which *Agenda*, as a South African feminist academic journal, is particularly concerned with.

In this article we reflect on how *Agenda*, a feminist journal located in the Global South, and Africa specifically, mediates and balances the demands of peer-reviewed and peer-sanctioned knowledge production with the requisite gender, race and space/place equality, in the context of mechanisms that often privilege particular ways of knowing. The article addresses the following questions: *What* forces inhibit and marginalise women's voices generally, and black women's voices in particular, from feminist knowledge production and dissemination? *How* do we sustain our feminist positioning and critique in publishing in an environment where gender equality in the various socioeconomic spheres of life remains elusive, and where gender violence against women is rife, and this in the

context of 'scholarly' peer review? In particular, *how* do we ensure that the voices of those most marginalised by these inequalities and social forces are heard in ways that matter – and, indeed, count – in scholarly publishing? Informing these questions is our argument that it is not simply the quantitative dimension related to scholars of the south that matters in terms of *how many* get published, but also the qualitative dimension in respect of *who* gets published, *who* has access to publications, and what limitations and challenges exist in addressing these issues.

The challenges of peer review in feminist publishing

Within the global context of the politics of knowledge production described above, and the national South African context in particular, *Agenda's* formation in 1987 had a personal and grounded history in struggle. It was formed by a small group of feminist activists and students sitting around a kitchen table, who saw that women's voices needed to inform the struggle for women's gender equality in the pre-democratic dispensation. The activists wanted a publication that would speak for all women. The journal filled a deep gap in existing publications as the only self-proclaimed feminist journal. *Agenda's* foundation was based on volunteerism and a commitment to the legitimation and actualisation of women's thinking, theorising and understanding of the real politics of women's lives, and to putting African feminism on the map on the eve of the democratic elections in South Africa. As such, the issues were published and edited on the run, out of car boots and during moments snatched from teaching and work.

The founding collective of feminists envisaged *Agenda's* aim as being to

> provide a forum for comment, discussion, and debate on all aspects of women's lives … to attempt to understand the position of women within South African society … [and] the ways in which class, race and gender shape women's lives and also of women's struggles, past and present. [The Collective hoped] that *Agenda* [would] enable women to discuss, analyse and debate their position in society, their vision of a more hopeful future for women, and strategies for coping now and organising towards the future. (*Agenda* Collective, 1987 inside cover cited in Meer 1997: 6)

Agenda's first test was criticism from black women activists and researchers that the journal needed to include a broader representation of black women, questioning whether white women could write about black women and, more critically, who should speak for black women (emphasis added). A critical internal review and evaluation followed. This led to a change in practice that reflected more consciously the broader inequalities among women and awareness of the need to challenge the politics of knowledge production as they existed in apartheid universities which privileged whites over black women writing about black women's oppression.

In the same vein, as a feminist journal, present-day *Agenda* sees its role in local publishing (and indeed, on the African continent) as challenging gender inequality in social contexts and, in particular, including the voices of women (and particular kinds of women) who are usually excluded and marginalised from research and publishing. Our work with this journal (and we speak collectively here as authors who are also on the journal's editorial collective) is premised on the belief that women in South Africa and elsewhere suffer oppression, exploitation and violence, albeit in varying degrees and intensity, depending on other markers of identity such as social class, race and geographical location (see, e.g., Ampofo and Arnfred 2009; Code 1991; Collins 1990; Glesne 2010; hooks 2000; Maguire 1996; McDermott 1994; Millen 1997; Spelman 1988). We believe that 'speaking from the south' (Falabella Luco, Maurizi and Ramay 2009b: 269) and, in particular,

speaking from the margins of South African society generally, and the academic community specifically, places women at a significant disadvantage in the publishing arena. Our history of apartheid further marginalises black African women, especially those who reside and work in poorly resourced rural contexts. As such, *Agenda* is concerned with empowering women through encouraging and publishing research that takes seriously 'issues of justice and power and [is] committed to uncovering and understanding the forces that cause and sustain oppression' (Maguire cited in Glesne 2010: 11; Moothoo-Padayachie 2008).

Women authors' publishing experiences in *Agenda* – as a feminist journal committed to the above principles in relation to women's empowerment, yet also enabled and limited by the requirements of peer review – have varied over the years. This has been highlighted by critiques and oppositional voices which have challenged editorial decisions on which submissions to include and which to exclude, the content and quality of approved submissions, the distribution of authorship according to the various markers of individual and group identity in South Africa and the region, and editorial membership. To illustrate, Pereira (2002) identifies the nature of knowledge and the notion of what knowledge has greater worth as one barrier against certain women's voices in publishing. While contemporary knowledge is often partitioned according to disciplines and

> takes power, and the energy that the upholding of power demands, to maintain these disciplinary divides … [feminists have suggested that] transcending this dualism requires a recognition of the extent to which knowing is itself dependent on the exercise of imagination. (ibid: 9)

According to Pereira, this requires bringing together intellectual and personal ways of being, of what we believe about being human within a South African and a global context, as well as the practices that inhibit or facilitate our expression of those beliefs. Such imagination enables feminists to produce knowledge which aims to challenge socio-political injustices against women. Most of the disciplines in which we partition, compartmentalise and propagate knowledge, tend to rely on northern theorising and ways of knowing. The 'north' and 'south' are more than geopolitical entities – they are also matrices of knowledge. For example, recently there have been active debates on the challenges of canon formation in the social scientific division of labour between a theory-producing northern metropole (which has the resources and is seen as the site of science, methods and concepts) and a data-providing southern periphery (which, beyond data, is seen to have myths, folklore and art, with the assumption that no conceptual basis exists) (see, e.g., Connell 2007). The 'south', as Connell (ibid: ix) explains, is '[to] emphasize relations – authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnerships, sponsorship, appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery'. Inaugurating the field in a fairly explicit way so as to foreground the sociological and political economy of knowledge, Connell (ibid: 45) reveals the hidden geopolitical assumptions in northern social theory and critiques about social thought from colonised and postcolonial contexts. In his view, as well as in the related texts cited above, southern theories tend to be ignored, excluded or pushed into service as a 'data mine'. In response, various scholars have offered perspectives that interrogate, contest and subvert the epistemological structures of the north–south hierarchy, thus opening up an opportunity to rethink the social world in the context of knowledge production (see Alatas 2006; Chakrabarty 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; Hountondji 1997; Quijano 2000). To illustrate, in their study, Comaroff and Comaroff (2011) attempt to not only retrieve the contributions of the global south, but to insert them into dominant narratives of history.

Further, most of the resources (including research money and journals) are located in countries of the north, and are thus out of reach of most women in South Africa and environs. Ironically, northern scholarship is now also fundamentally dependent on untapped southern contexts, yet even then the resource allocation for research is uneven when it ultimately arrives in the south. In the context of peer review, particularly where processes are dominated by these voices (Falabella Luco et al. 2009a), such alternative ways of knowing are often rejected and marginalised. Indeed, northern writers dominate in a variety of ways, by building on assumptions that mobilise their own location and placement in the world, while subjecting those in the south to the periphery (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). The authors argue that for decades, southern societies have been regarded 'primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means' (ibid: 1), along with being deemed un-academic.

In South Africa (read in conjunction with Falabella Luco et al.'s [2009a] question about *who* writes about *whom*), the intersection of race and gender (and social class) has dominated discourse about whose voices are privileged in scholarly debates.

Agenda has been at the forefront of these debates. For example, in an issue devoted to race, identity and change, Cheryl de la Rey (1997) pondered the response of white feminists who, at a 1991 conference on 'Women and Gender in southern Africa', reacted with surprise and hurt when black feminists challenged what they saw as the dominance of white women's voices. It was here, De la Rey notes, that Kedibone Letlaka-Rennert publicly challenged *Agenda* for the dominance of white women in its (editorial) ranks, paving the way for black women to be invited to join the editorial collective – a principle strategy that, to this day, the organisation still maintains. In an earlier issue, Sunde and Bozalek (1993: 29) asked how

> at the level of theorising, [the power differences among women] are reflected, understood, explored and perhaps entrenched … [and] whether women in different race, class and ethnic positions, where those positions reflect historical differences in power, can write about the experiences of other women.

In their article, the authors reflect on whether they, as white middle-class women, can write about other/black women in ways that do not further entrench the unequal power relations between the two, or (mis)appropriate other women's experiences. In this regard, in the belief captured in the Sesotho proverb, *bohloko ba seta bo utluwa ke monga sona* (the pain inflicted by an ill-fitting shoe is best felt by the wearer), generations of black women and feminists believed that race significantly impacts black women's experiences of gender and gender inequality. Therefore, white women cannot and should not write about black women's experiences (see, e.g., hooks [1984] and Collins [1990], writing in the context of the US; Funani [cited in Sunde and Bozalek 1993] in the context of South Africa). Alternative views from some white and black women suggest that it is not who writes that is important, but how it is done. Fouché (cited in Sunde and Bozalek 1993: 32), for instance, concludes that 'white women who have access to the means of making black women's voices heard should use this to ensure that their experiences are documented'.

In a type of retrospective and prospective, in an issue of *Agenda* celebrating its ten-year anniversary, Shamim Meer (1997) offers a critical reflection on the debates and issues the journal addressed in its first decade (a total of 33 issues). While celebrating the journal's achievements over the years, she simultaneously identifies several challenges facing both the journal and feminist publishing in the second decade of operation. First, Meer (ibid: 5) notes the 'technicist agendas from above', which

saw the decline of activism in post-apartheid South Africa (see also Moletsane and Lesko 2004) as a barrier to women's voices in feminist and other research. According to Meer, current key debates tend not to question the status quo, and (in the context of rigorous peer review in high-status journals) articles focus on the 'personal as political – a key component of feminist questioning' (ibid: 13). The result is that women's scholarship, which has dominated such debates (see Bennett 2000), tends to be marginalised and rejected by peer reviewers in favour of 'more middle-class concerns'. To illustrate, Meer writes:

> Race issues as they afflict the majority of South Africans, including the working-class and urban and rural poor have not been covered in the pages of *Agenda* [up to that point]. … [Even] more cutting edge content in *Agenda* on body politics, sexuality and child abuse, for example, have also been approached from more academic and professional perspectives. (ibid: 14)

Needless to say, since then *Agenda* has attempted to address some of these gaps in subsequent issues, and through its other projects which complement the journal. These include a radio programme, which seeks to take content to the community level through local-language broadcasting and feminist dialogues which bring together academics and activists from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and other grassroots organisations. The panellists debate and identify solutions to local challenges. In the same issue of *Agenda*, Friedman (1997: 22) reports on the journal's efforts to address the race hiatus in its publishing:

> Challenging the racist historical access to controlling knowledge production has tended to dominate the criteria for selecting new members of the collective … over the years, a number of women from divergent experiences, backgrounds and identities have participated in the project.

Bennett (2000: 6), however, points to complex barriers to writing and publishing among women – and black women in particular – arguing that

> access to writing is hugely complicated by the emphasis on English as the language of influential public knowledges, our multilingualism, and the legacies of apartheid-based educational practices [and the fact that] most communication relevant to African-based women (and many men) occurs in indigenous languages, and involves technologies of voice (radios, conversation, verbal 'advice' from a host of sources, religious oratory, storytelling, and so on) rather than technologies of print.

It is this complex disconnect that *Agenda* has sought to address through its radio programme and feminist dialogues over the years, by extending feminist debate and discussion beyond the spaces of peer-reviewed publications and into the material and visceral spaces of a broader public domain. In turn, these discussions, insights and engagements feed back into the articles, focus and briefing sections, and poetry (amongst other submissions) that make it into the pages of the journal.

Bennett (2000) reflects on Indaba99, the forum held just before the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair, where the theme was Women's Voices: Gender, Books and Development. The forum focused on addressing the various challenges of writing about current gender injustices in the postcolonial era, and on the perceptions of 'women's voices' and where 'women with voices' are located socially, politically and geographically. Bennett (ibid: 77) highlights one of the presentations made at that forum, which suggested that unless we examine the 'systematic practices of patriarchy and neo-capitalist energies which daily amputate most men's access to all-too-audible discussions', women's 'voicelessness' cannot be addressed. In the same issue of *Agenda*, dedicated to the politics of writing, Guzana (2000: 75) similarly concludes that '[if] women are referred to as silent we need to re-examine the context that renders them "voiceless", [which has] ideological implications for

men and women', and that ideology operates in an environment influenced by social forces such as race, class and gender.

With this issue dedicated to the politics of writing, in addition to reflecting on the socio-cultural impediments to women's writing and publishing, in 1999 *Agenda* also published the writings of emerging writers. These authors were first brought together during a six-day writing workshop at the University of Cape Town's African Gender Institute to learn about theories of gender and their manifold uses in academic writing (Bennett 2000). This was followed by the 'Daring to Write' workshop organised by *Agenda* in Durban in the same year (see Prinsloo 2000). While most novice writers at the two workshops reflected and wrote on real issues which impact communities, they had to negotiate the terrain of peer review in order to be published in *Agenda*. Mama (2000: 14), in the same issue on the politics of writing, aptly captures this dilemma, noting that 'to move beyond writing for one's own reasons, into the published realm, requires a series of encounters with gate-keepers of various kinds', including peer reviewers and journal editors. This has huge implications for how feminist publications such as *Agenda* make the ideals of including alternative and marginalised voices in academic journals a reality.

A further (and the most current) barrier against women's scholarly publishing has been linked to the rise of men's organisations and their silencing effect on women's voices. To illustrate, Meer (n.d.) notes that in the corporate and public spheres, even in community organisations, men tend to be in leadership positions, with women relegated to service-oriented and caring roles. Further, with the rise in understandings of gender as including both men and women, donors are increasingly asking organisations (including women's organisations) to include men and boys in their programming. According to Meer (ibid: 14), this has eroded

> the safe spaces women had created … as women were pressurised to bring men into their organisations, and as donor support shifted away from women's movement building (AWID 2005) … [This trend has meant that the] power that men have over women, and the possibility that it may not be in men's gender interests to transform gender relations or achieve greater equality, were ignored.

It may also mean that more publications on gender equality will now be coming from these organisations, further marginalising women's voices and issues. Importantly, men's organisations tend to pay lip service and dilute broader interconnected gender struggles in their own work and writing, especially when it concerns women and sexual minorities. They also tend rather to foreground the role of men, with little (if any) self-reflection on male power. More than two decades after the end of apartheid, within the context of peer review and the continuing lack of access to knowledge production resources among some sectors of our society (see above), *Agenda* continues to struggle to find effective strategies to balance these views. Some of these strategies are discussed below.

Strategies for mitigating the race, gender and class gap in publishing

In effect, how has *Agenda* addressed the challenges discussed here, in order to sustain feminist positioning and critique in publishing in an environment where gender equality in the various socio-economic spheres of life remains elusive, and gender violence against women is rife? What strategies does *Agenda* deploy to ensure that the voices of those most marginalised by inequality and social forces are heard in ways that count in scholarly publishing, particularly in the context of peer review?

First, *Agenda* has deliberately focused on nurturing and developing the capacity of writers, while at the same time identifying and supporting new writers and alternative voices. *Agenda* Feminist Media (the organisation) developed a writing skills programme to continue its mission as a feminist media project, even though the development of writers had its germination with the original founding collective (Wyllie and Davis 2004). The programme has contributed to this mission by enabling writers with concrete skills to reflect on, and write about, gender. It has specifically sought to mentor writers to write for a broad audience (including academics) and for publication. The programme is based on a process of mentoring, collaboration, co-writing, participatory teaching and learning. In the writing skills programme, young emerging writers (previously and currently disadvantaged women) are mentored and their writing is published in the journal. One of the outcomes of the writing programme is a growth in the pool of emerging writers and in the diversity of contributors to the journal. The organisation is currently exploring an appropriate academic partnership to host a writing skills programme.

Second, linked to the above, to balance the diversity of contributors, the consulting editors, assisted by the editorial collective, have focused on monitoring the demographic profile of writers in each issue. The conceptualisation of each issue entails, as a prerequisite, consideration by the respective guest editors of how the issue will include a diversity of voices with expertise across gender, race and nationality, in offering coverage of particular themes that contribute to the production of new ideas. To mobilise space for new writers, the journal has recently introduced a policy which precludes previously published writers from publishing again within a two-year cycle. Comprised of academics, gender researchers and activists, the editorial collective seeks to balance the need for diversity and representation from African women academics on the continent.

Third, *Agenda* has published targeted/focused issues (e.g., series on African feminisms, gender-based violence) to speak back to northern dominance, address current local issues and ensure local theorising. In these issues it is not simply the empirical and geographical contexts that come under the spotlight, but also their conceptual and theoretical foundation. To illustrate, the series on African feminisms aimed to broaden the scope for contributors from diverse African countries, and for theoretical understandings of the issues and concerns affecting women as regards women's inequality on this continent. An important black feminist intellectual departure was the celebration of identity politics that flowed from work from the African diaspora in the 1990s and debates on gender and difference – white/black, women/men and many other axes. The differences debate, apart from the black/white schism, also attempted to bridge the academic/activist, rural/urban, nature/nurture, private/public and other divides between and amongst women. The aim was, in a sense, to break down class and other barriers which manifest in so many forms, in order to build voice amongst women and, more importantly, to hear what these voices had (or still have) to say. Writers used the freedom to explore gender politics in new ways that troubled and unsettled understandings of the 'totalising' discourses of race and class that flowed from colonialism and apartheid. Lesbian, gay and transgender identities became an important (if not critical) area of contestation around equality and the dominant heteronormative meanings of both gender and sex.

In practice, one might say this accounts for the journal's hybridity – the variety of contributions and efforts that it has made through the years, to bring in the diverse voices of women and to reach out to them. *Agenda's* audience has never been very large as a peer-reviewed journal, but as the only feminist journal in South Africa for many years, run by women and gender activists as an

independent project, it also endeavoured to find ways to reach out to broader audiences of women, so as to bring the message of women's right to equal rights.

Fourth, *Agenda* has developed a radio project which focuses on issues raised in journal content, and packages these in accessible radio segments, for broadcast by community radio stations. By making use of the medium of radio, *Agenda* aims to reach more diverse audiences and to support debate on gender inequality which informs and challenges practices that perpetuate inequality.

Fifth, *Agenda* has revived its past practice of convening feminist dialogues to foster debate on critical gender equality issues, and to support advocacy and activism in response. A further rationale for convening forums is for debate to feed into the work of the organisation, and for issues raised at the forums to contribute to discussions around possible themes for the journal. Topics have highlighted and opened up for discussion issues of government accountability, the mandate and areas of responsibility of gender structures and their capacity to tackle gender injustice and inequalities, discussion and sharing among women's organisations and women in social movements on their work and challenges, the crisis in women's health, women and food security, as well as the critical areas of rurality, ageing and land redistribution. *Agenda* has published reports on feminist dialogues on its website and in the journal, and used social media platforms to extend the reach of its audience.

Lastly, *Agenda's* principle of empowering women and unearthing voices that are usually marginalised and silenced in mainstream publications, has been strengthened in a north–south collaboration with 'Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-led "from the ground up" policy-making in addressing Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa'. *Agenda* is one of the partners in the six-year action research and intervention-based programme directed by Claudia Mitchell at McGill University, Montreal (Canada) and Relebohile Moletsane at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), and will contribute to their combined efforts to build a platform for young girls to be heard in addressing gender violence.

Conclusion

Part of the reason *Agenda* has been able to continue publishing a journal for over 28 years, is the organisation's reflective practices as much as its efforts to shape a feminist editorial policy. These have been matched by an awareness of the need to maintain and strengthen the journal's International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) and South African Post-Secondary Education (SAPSE) accreditation, and the pressure to comply with peer-review standards. Research which is motivated by market-driven priorities, rather than identified social needs, has contributed to the homogenisation of research and the marginalisation of humanities and gender studies programmes at a variety of universities in South Africa, on the continent and abroad. This has further peripheralised gender as a critical and socially relevant area of research in the broader context of higher education spaces.

As an independent project, *Agenda* will continue to publish research that meets scholarly review and research standards and critical engagement with social theory. Equally important, it will respond to the imperative to elicit creative thinking and ongoing theorisation on gender on the African continent. We balance academic conventions and the formality of empirical research with formats that provide room for writers to express themselves in less restrictive forms, and give voice to

feminist activism in other formats within the journal (i.e., perspective, open forum, poetry, reportback, photo essay). In addition, we have exercised the capacity to invite new directions, to encourage research in areas which we see as priorities for local and southern feminist research that have been neglected and overlooked, or are not recognised as worthy of attention. Recent examples include 'Girlhood in southern Africa' (issue 79, 2009) that sought to address the absence of research and studies addressing girls in developing countries, and opening up research and debate on the question of teenage desire and identity in 'Teenage fertility and desire' (issue 89, 2011). The guest editors of the issue on 'Gender and rurality' (issue 84, 2010) (Moletsane and Ntombela 2010: 5) point out that

> seldom is rurality and the interrelationships therein viewed as worth studying in its/their own right. Even more silenced are the gender dynamics that characterise the rural condition, particularly the gendered ways in which men and women and girls and boys negotiate their day-to-day lives.

The danger of ignoring the global neoliberal agenda and its silencing and effacing of vulnerable communities and communities of poor women on the continent, in favour of the economic interests of the global north, is raised by writers in 'Meeting the challenge of the Millennium Development Goals' (issue 91). Another recent issue took up the themes of 'Ageing, intergenerationality and gender' (issue 94, 2012). The guest editors (Reddy and Sanger 2012: 7) note:

> The broad coverage of scholarship on ageing and intergenerationality confirms that this is a field replete with new ideas and some cutting edge research, but still sadly very largely focused on northern contexts, and to a lesser extent the East. There is no doubt from our assessment that there is a dearth of scholarship, and we hope that contributions to this edition will reinforce debate, discussion and perspective from an African perspective.

An activist agenda that holds identity with feminisms of the south has needed to centre marginalised voices and to ensure that the platform for our work is sustainable through questioning and interrogating, by unsettling and resisting. Frequent exclusion, in mainstream knowledge production of gender as a centrally important category of analysis (or an add-on to race and class), is one area of contestation that has not disappeared despite the social marginalisation, exclusion and silencing of women and sexual minorities.

As indicated throughout this argument, peer-review processes are important links in the chain of knowledge production and, as noted above, can often shut down debate and silence new critical voices which are struggling to emerge in the south. The questions that younger writers confront are as troubled and complicated as those addressed by the feminists who started *Agenda,* when confronting women's marginalisation from debates on the future democratic state. These include, among others, expectations that our non-sexist democracy would address gender violence in its diverse manifestations; stigma arising from women's greater exposure to HIV infection; the unequal burden of poverty borne by women; and the hope that representational politics and the gender machinery would provide answers. What is an indispensable ally, and needs to be more widely appreciated and valued, is a type of peer review that is critical and informed by ethics, feminist epistemologies and gender theory in its intersections with race, class, geography and other axes of difference. Also, there is a need to question the power relations that create and sustain gender regimes and hierarchies of power. To return to Connell (2007: 230), to revitalise theories in the south and animate the social is ultimately a question of democracy. This has the potential for social solidarity, and for providing social critique and knowledge of the power structures underpinning society. As a feminist project, *Agenda* requires that our writers consider how their research

contributes to social critique and to overcoming gender inequalities and injustices. It must also raise awareness of gender and other social inequalities. In other words, research, like knowledge production, cannot operate in a geopolitical vacuum, but should be linked to wider social transformation and social justice.

The editorial values that *Agenda* prioritises are to nurture new writers through a process of anonymous peer review and to encourage rigour in other ways. These include identifying readings for them to consult, and mentoring rather than offering outright rejection. Even as we seek to encourage new writers, we increasingly see the concurrent importance of encouraging emerging writers to engage in the practice of peer review, so as to assist other women writers in getting their work published. This holds true especially for black women who straddle both the complexities of inherited apartheid and postcolonial inequalities, and the added burden of institutionalised patriarchy. In a recent profile piece in *Agenda*, Mokone et al. (2012: 140–141) bear witness to the idea that evolving common practices can contribute to theorising as a practice of belonging and solidarity:

> We explore the experience of women in a historically-black university with a deeply entrenched culture of patriarchy. We theorise our experience of establishing a community in which we have evolved ways of working that promote the academic development of women. Our collaboration over 20 months on this paper has shown that the issues that women face in academia cut across disciplinary boundaries. Our academic specialisations are diverse and we represent different stages in our academic careers, ranging in designation from junior lecturer to professor, and from novice researchers to established scholars but our concerns about women in academia converge.

The above example illustrates that, notwithstanding all the criteria that ultimately inform peer review as a process, the authors' experience and strategy to publish in the context of peer review and deep-seated patriarchy in the university environment speak to some of the original and founding principles of the feminist project, namely feminist solidarity and collaboration in the building of capacity by women themselves.

As articulated by practitioners cited in our argument, we believe southern theorisation is vital for engaging with the critical issues facing the south, and in critical reflection on their meanings. We hope that social research, questioning and interpretation will be supported by peer review that is neither androcentric or phallocentric, nor bound by those neoliberal values that have served to muffle and further submerge research by African women. Rather, from *Agenda'*s viewpoint, such theorisation will only contribute to knowledge production meaningfully if it is through platforms where southern voices can be heard and published as being from the south. This is, provided what we conceive by this modality is the idea of understanding the world beyond Western modes of knowing. We further contend that there is the danger of objectifying sexualities, bodies and gender in ways that tend to reproduce and entrench hegemonic narratives and the inequalities we endeavour to expose and critique. Bhana (2013: 5), for example, writes that there is a problem in ignoring how in the discussion of sexuality, 'danger, death and disease' is intensified. She highlights this one-sided view of sexuality, citing Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina (2005: 94):

> The starving African ... must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history: such diversions ruin the dramatic moment ... She must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering ...

This caricature of representations of the African woman remind us of the need for greater attention to the affective, and for addressing the damage done by research which ignores the lives, aspirations and experiences of women on this continent.

In sum, as *Agenda* moves closer to its third decade of feminist publishing, there is a renewed commitment to the feminist identification of our collective work. As framed in the epigraph to this argument, Tembe (2004: 129) confirms a view we hold central to our project: to produce knowledge is to engage in a form of labour under very specific conditions that are also shaped by very material struggles that tell stories in a variety of ways beyond the academic. As Harding (2008) reminds us in respect of the gendered division of labour resulting in distinctive outcomes for women and men as producers of knowledge, intellectual work also reflects such divisions. At *Agenda* we recognise that to produce intellectual work of the highest quality requires a commitment in the service of women in the broadest possible terms. If peer review is about excellence and quality, it is simultaneously about the kind of values we espouse in ensuring that a diversity of voices is heard. This is to ensure that feminism is not just simply an intellectual and political idea, but is rather integral to putting our feminism(s) into practice. What matters is the value in providing a space for debate and inquiry to advance high-quality and cutting-edge scholarship that pushes the boundaries of our knowledge production, policy work and advocacy.

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