

ASR Forum on Women and Gender in Africa: Part 1

Introduction: Forty Years of African Women's Studies

Kathleen Sheldon and Judith Van Allen, Guest Editors

Forty years ago African women's studies as a field was just beginning to get started, and one of the first publications to recognize the new research was the *African Studies Review*, which published a special issue (volume 18, number 3),

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Judith Van Allen is a senior fellow at the Institute for African Development, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University. She helped initiate feminist African women's studies in North America in the early 1970s, starting with the publication of "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women" (*Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6 [2], 1972). Her work has focused on the political economy of women's political mobilization, and her current research is concerned with the problematics of rights claims for addressing gender justice within the political economies of southern Africa. She has been a long-time activist in the African Studies Association Women's Caucus, serving as co-convenor in 2014 and 2015. E-mail: jv43@cornell.edu

with eight informative articles. Several of those scholars (Jean O'Barr, Judith Olmstead, Christine Oppong, Margaret Strobel, Stephanie Urdang, and Audrey Wipper) made many more contributions to women's studies in Africa and more widely, and some of the articles have remained as key sources over the decades.

That year, 1975, was also marked by the creation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Women's Centre in Addis Ababa, one of the first such entities on the continent, and the beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women with the important global women's conference in Mexico City. The intervening decades have seen many changes in women's lives. In this new collection of articles, organized to mark the forty years, the advances in scholarship on women are noted. The 1975 issue of *ASR* was heavy with political research on such topics as women's organizations in Kenya, the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau, politics in Ghana, women's work in Senegal and Ethiopia, and women's dance and wedding celebrations in Mombasa. As co-editors of this *ASR* Forum in 2015, we hope to highlight some of the new research on African women. The articles in this issue—as well as a second set forthcoming in the next issue (April 2016)—demonstrate new insights on the subjects of marriage and sexuality, ideas about motherhood, advances in women's rights, and theoretical complexities of southern African feminism. Our contributors are senior and junior, African, European, and North American, and they bring a range of approaches to understanding African women.

The recent expansion of research and publication in African women's studies is also seen in the special book review section in this issue (231–48), which includes nine reviews of some of the exciting work that the cohort of mostly younger scholars is now turning out. Part 1 of our forum in this issue focuses on southern Africa, with three articles. Part 2 in the next issue will include selections from Koni Benson's new graphic history of women's struggles for decent housing in Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa, accompanied by her essay about using graphic history to reach a wider audience. It will also include work on other parts of Africa that continues the discussions about marriage, sexuality, and motherhood developed in this issue.

In this issue, Judith Van Allen discusses theoretical concepts related to women's rights in South Africa and Botswana in "What Are Women's Rights Good For? Contesting and Negotiating Gender Regimes in Southern Africa" (97–128). She examines case studies of the citizenship debate in Botswana in 1982, the shift in focus of the work of the Zimbabwe-based but regionally active Women and Law in Southern Africa, and the political activism of women in South Africa in the face of ongoing and virulent violence against women. With those examples, she suggests that African women are developing their own specific strategies for using rights claims, transforming and adapting rights by drawing on new interpretations of traditional rights based in kinship and women's collective power.

Elizabeth Thornberry also makes a provocative argument about tradition and current practice in “Virginity Testing, History, and the Nostalgia for Custom in Contemporary South Africa” (129–48). She states that in South Africa, “public debate has fundamentally associated custom and tradition with the regulation of gender and sexuality, and assumed an opposition between these concepts and gender equality” (130). She goes on to place the practice of virginity testing in its historic context of Xhosa communities in the Eastern Cape, where older women had control over younger women and testing was a way of reining in male aggressive behavior, and rape in particular. She raises issues of both sexuality and women’s rights as she brings the debate of virginity testing to present-day Zulu practice, which feminist activists claim has been used to shame women who have been the victims of assault. She argues that young women, who were historically protected by kin control over their virginity, do not benefit in the same way from modern performances of similar testing procedures.

Signe Arnfred, looking at the example of Mozambique, makes a comparative argument about sexuality in “Female Sexuality as Capacity and Power? Reconceptualizing Sexualities in Africa” (149–70). She suggests that sexuality was not a focus of research and analysis at first because for African women that was an arena of female competence and authority rather than a source of oppression. She inserts her own research on female initiation practices in Mozambique into a larger analysis that demonstrates an acceptance of women’s right to sexual pleasure and erotic experiences. She concludes by considering research on urban youth and sexuality in Maputo, Nairobi, and Dakar that highlights female agency in sexual matters, with a goal of pleasure for both men and women. This perspective provides a very different view from much of the Western analysis of women and sexuality in Africa.

All three articles bring to the fore new perspectives on topics that were not closely analyzed in the special issue forty years ago, when sexuality, human rights, and the persistence of traditional practices in new forms were not the focus of scholarship on women in Africa. The authors have expanded the range of analysis and brought new issues to our attention, while honoring African women’s histories, experiences, and activism. Part 2, forthcoming in the next issue of *ASR*, will provide further evidence of the continued strength and development of African women’s studies.