

# ASR Forum on Women and Gender in Africa: Part 2

## Introduction

Judith Van Allen and Kathleen Sheldon, Guest Editors

We are pleased to present the second part of the forum that we organized in recognition of forty years of African women's studies. As mentioned when part 1 appeared in Volume 58 (3) (December 2015), the *African Studies Review*, in 1975, published one of the first journal special issues

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**Kathleen Sheldon** is an independent historian with a research affiliation at the University of California, Los Angeles, Center for the Study of Women. She has published primarily on African women's history and the history of Mozambique, including *Pounders of Grain: A History of Women, Work, and Politics in Mozambique* (Heinemann, 2002) and *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). She is on the editorial boards of the *Dictionary of African Biography* and the online resource *Oxford Bibliographies in African Studies*, for which she has written the entries "Women in African History" (2012) and "Women and Colonialism" (2013). She is a senior editor for a new online resource, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia in African History*, edited by Thomas Spear (forthcoming). E-mail: [ksheldon@ucla.edu](mailto:ksheldon@ucla.edu)

focusing on women. The intervening decades have seen an impressive growth in the field, in the quantity of books, articles, and other materials that have been published, in the range of topics covered by scholars around the world, and in the depth and breadth of approaches used by scholars writing about African women and gender.

This forum introduces *ASR* readers to Koni Benson's new approach for making work on African women more accessible through graphic history. The other three articles also move beyond traditional boundaries. They are linked by their focus on marriage, and explore its changing meanings and implications over time and in new contexts and situations. Rhiannon Stephens discusses African women's history with greater detail for a far earlier time period than previously thought possible. Hélène Neveu Kringelbach investigates the global dimensions of women's marriage options. Deborah Atobrah and Akosua Adomako Ampofo examine the role of husbands caring for wives who have cancer. While part 1 focused on southern Africa, the articles in part 2 move to Uganda, Senegal, and Ghana.

Rhiannon Stephens, in "‘Whether They Promised Each Other Some Thing Is Difficult to Work Out’: The Complicated History of Marriage in Uganda" (127–53), innovatively uses historical linguistics to explore the complexity of domestic and sexual relationships in the Great Lakes region. Building on the work of scholars who have challenged Western scholars' view of "traditional" African marriage as akin to slavery for women, she argues that women and men have long been negotiating the meanings and processes of marriage and divorce, carrying the analysis back to 700 CE. This provides the background for her analysis of the patterns of misunderstanding and conflict between nineteenth-century Christian missionaries trying to fit the relationships of their converts into their own categories, and their converts' creative resistance to those attempts. Although we lack formal documentation for the eighth century in central Africa, Stephens shows convincingly that we can use other tools to recover women's history for very early time periods.

Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, in "‘Marrying Out’ for Love: Women's Narratives of Polygyny and Alternative Marriage Choices in Contemporary Senegal" (155–74), moves from her earlier work on urban Senegal to investigate women's marital options in a globalizing context. She demonstrates how women's choices reflect both change and persistence in attitudes and practices among men and women in Dakar and in France. She focuses on women who grew up in polygynous households and finds that many had experienced those households as conflict-ridden and difficult. As adults these women opted to marry European men in a deliberate effort to avoid the tensions found in households with two or more wives. Her research indicates that the received wisdom that Senegalese women accept the widespread practice of polygyny does not hold true for all women. Those women who are able to make a different choice—particularly middle-class women—often do so.

In "Expressions of Masculinity and Femininity in Husbands' Care of Wives with Cancer in Accra" (175–97), Deborah Atobrah and Akosua

Adomako Ampofo interrogate the meaning of marriage in contemporary urban Ghana by examining the internal dynamics of married couples when wives face serious health issues. Drawing on the extensive literature on caregiving and the care economy, they analyze in-depth interviews of both husbands and wives, revealing the complexities in each particular case while drawing out the similarities that reflect social constructs. They raise serious questions about the ways in which cultural concepts of masculinities and femininities and of marital responsibility by both husbands and wives combine with the weaknesses of the health care system to produce extreme vulnerability for gravely ill wives.

Koni Benson's "Graphic Novel Histories: Women's Organized Resistance to Slum Clearance in Crossroads South Africa, 1975–2015" (199–214) includes a selection of images from her multipart graphic history of the protests staged by women in Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa, along with her commentary on the process of developing and writing a graphic history. (The images here are in black and white, but the color images from Benson's graphic history are available in the online edition of *ASR*.) Benson emphasizes the importance of working in new forms in order to enliven stories about historical people and events. Working with the illustrators André Trantraal and Nathan Trantraal (the Trantraal Brothers) and Ashley Marais, she has rewritten and adapted her scholarly work on Crossroads, covering mobilizations, protests, and government repression over several decades, making the story accessible to a much wider group of readers, far beyond the academy.

All four of these scholars provide further evidence of the expansion of African women's studies, with new perspectives on historical writing for a nonacademic audience, early history sources on marriage and motherhood, changing ideas about marriage and family, and gendered assumptions about illness and health. Although we did not organize further book reviews for this issue, please note the nine reviews published in part 1 that bring attention to the important work currently being researched and published that focuses on African women. The two parts of this forum provide just a glimpse of the wide range of work now being done by a variety of scholars from both the South and the North, an expansion of work that develops new perspectives and depth in the study of African women and gender. We look forward to seeing much more of this innovative work in future issues of *ASR*.