

Appropriating ‘Gender’ and ‘Empowerment’: The Resignification of Feminist Ideas in Nigeria’s Neoliberal Reform Programme¹

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1 Introduction

This article examines the reform programme of the Obasanjo Government (1999–2007), as laid out in the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) (National Planning Commission 2004), using it to reflect on processes that are involved in instrumentalist and opportunistic uses of ‘gender’ and ‘empowerment’ by the state. I argue that NEEDS works ideologically to manufacture hegemony and the illegitimacy of dissent with regard to the Obasanjo government’s reform programme. These effects are produced through the workings of particular processes; here I examine the most evident of these – appropriation. I make my argument in two ways: first, through epistemological challenges to the use of particular discourses in the text; and secondly, through exposure of the hiatus between governmental rhetoric and practice.

Initiated halfway through the first term of Obasanjo’s tenure, NEEDS was the first explicitly articulated ‘economic and development agenda’ during his administration, as opposed to the characteristic one-off programmes previously developed on an *ad hoc* basis. Initial expectations of the government’s goals and intentions were high, given the long-awaited end of military rule and Obasanjo’s status as the first elected civilian head of state for decades. The aims of the government’s reform programme are expressed in the NEEDS document as follows:

As Nigeria’s Poverty Reduction Strategy, NEEDS builds on earlier efforts to produce the Interim

Poverty Reduction Strategy ... NEEDS recognises that the fundamental challenge at this stage of Nigeria’s development is to meet the basic needs of its people and reduce poverty on a sustained basis. (National Planning Commission 2004: vi)

What is the vision for Nigeria? What kind of Nigeria do we want for ourselves, for our children and for the rest of the world? These questions were our starting point in creating a plan for *prosperity*.³ (National Planning Commission 2004: viii)

The document goes on to articulate a vision of ‘Nigeria fulfil[ling] its potential to become Africa’s largest economy and a major player in the global economy’ (*ibid.*: ix). Four key strategies are identified for this purpose: re-orienting values, reducing poverty, creating wealth, and generating employment. The NEEDS document (*ibid.*: ix) states that ‘these goals can be achieved only by creating an environment in which business can thrive, government is redirected to providing basic services and people are empowered to take advantage of the new livelihood opportunities the plan will stimulate’.

It is worth noting that the economic agenda underscores prosperity, begging the question of *prosperity for whom?* Public officials and others with access to state resources have been able to become ever more prosperous from the astonishing wealth emanating from oil proceeds, resources which have not been used to improve the lives of the vast

majority of Nigerians. Despite its enormous natural resources such as land, petroleum, natural gas and solid minerals, the majority of the Nigerian population is poor. The richest 20 per cent of the population consume 49.2 per cent of national income whilst the poorest 20 per cent have a miniscule share of 5.0 per cent. Between 1990 and 2005, the proportion of the population living below \$1 a day was 70.8 per cent, whilst 92.4 per cent lived below \$2 a day. In the year 2000, the maternal mortality rate per 100,000 live births was 1,100. Ranked 158 out of 177 developing countries, Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP 2007/8).

In the absence of measures to eliminate social and economic inequalities, it is not clear how the creation of wealth will reach those who are denied basic entitlements, particularly women. When the economic and development agenda prioritises becoming the largest and strongest economy in Africa, as opposed to social transformation and gender justice, then the reference to 'prosperity' can only mean prosperity for a few.

A striking feature of the government's 'economic reforms' is that they are presented as if they were independent of politics and political practice. Here I outline two ways in which appropriation and the denial of politics are configured in the interpretation of the reform programme of NEEDS. Whilst presented as gender neutral, the ways in which these features erase power from the field has implications for more specifically gendered appropriations of 'women' and 'empowerment'.

The first site of appropriation has to do with the recourse to values, partitioned from practice. The NEEDS document refers to three different sources of 'values': (i) the 2010 document, elaborated under the military regime of General Sani Abacha (1993–8); (ii) the Kuru Declaration, one of many proposed by the Nigerian Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS, located in Kuru); (iii) and the 1999 Constitution. Both the 2010 document and the Kuru Declaration highlight personal features such as respect for elders, honesty, personal discipline, hard work, industry. Although the term 'elders' is presented here as if gender neutral, in practice it is generally male elders that are the referents. Given that the senior men in collectivities are more often characterised by patriarchal than by feminist

worldviews, the underlying point here is that women and men should abide by patriarchal values.

The Constitution is the only source to refer to a 'national ethic', as opposed to characteristics that are valued in individuals. However, there is no specification of how the national ethic will be realised through the workings of the state. By implication, it is individuals that are responsible for bringing about the 'national ethic'. The emphasis on 'values' thus rests on an assumed dualism between individuals and the nation, or the state. This dualism between the individual and the collective has its roots in centuries of Western philosophical thought, being played out in popular thinking as well as academic disciplines (see e.g. Henriques *et al.* 1984). Ultimately, the emphasis on 'values' makes it possible for failings in social, political and economic spheres to be reduced to individual failings of morality, as opposed to the failure of the state in what ought to be its responsibility for distributive justice.

The second point concerning appropriation and the denial of politics has to do with the construction of a 'new citizen'. This is a person 'who values hard work and who realises that one cannot have something for nothing ... All citizens, regardless of gender, race, religion or politics, should feel that they have a stake in Nigeria's future and that their loyalty and diligence will be rewarded' (National Planning Commission 2004: viii). This construction of a hard-working, loyal citizen whose needs are more significant than their rights resonates with the notion of the citizen as an individual who is responsible for his or her own destiny (see, for example, Taylor 1996, cited in Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007). The latter, Taylor points out, is an identity that underpins the neoliberal reconstruction of the state as a facilitator, rather than key agent, of social and individual improvement in life.

That feminists have also deployed restricted understandings of women's citizenship is a theme addressed by Batliwala and Dhanraj (2007: 27). The authors examine ways in which the ideologies underlying self-help microcredit and income-generation groups for women as well as the push to increase women's access to political power reflect certain assumptions about citizenship. Central to these is the notion of citizenship as 'a fixed and bounded terrain' constructed primarily through gender, as opposed to being diffuse and therefore subject to contestation along many dimensions of power.

Addressing the complex workings of power – whether these have to do with women’s engagement with power or the ways in which the state relates to women in its programmes – is necessary to produce a more nuanced understanding of citizenship (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2007). I examine the representations of ‘women’, ‘gender’ and ‘empowerment’ in state discourse later in the article, with a view to illuminating the ways in which neoliberal programmes such as NEEDS appropriate feminist ideas in opportunistic ways. Before this, I turn to a particularly insidious aspect of the processes involved – the evacuation of power from the scene.

2 Writing the present, obscuring the past

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Sykes 1982: 42) definition of the verb to ‘appropriate’ cites the following meaning: ‘take possession of; take to oneself, especially without authority’. It also includes the quite different meaning of: ‘devote (money, etc.) to special purposes’. I use the term ‘appropriation’ here to refer to the practice of a given agency using terms developed in one context, to mean something quite different in another context. This may be contrasted with the use of the term ‘appropriation’ to refer to the legislative process of allocating funds for particular purposes, as happens in the formulation of an annual Appropriation Bill for the national budget.

Given the apparently clear links between economic policy and budgetary considerations, this might appear to be the obvious sense in which ‘appropriation’ and NEEDS might be discussed. My particular interest, however, is in state agencies’ use of feminist ideas which refer to specific events, processes or activities with a particular political intent, to mean something else (perhaps similar in form but most likely not in content) in another context with a different political intent. Appropriation is not restricted to the take-up of feminist ideas, but can also take place with regard to any apparently progressive idea that potentially serves the ends of the agency in mind.

Appropriation is possible because meaning does not reside in a word itself or even in its relationship to that which is its referent, but is more complicatedly arrived at through a complex of factors embedded in the social context of its usage (see Ryle 1949, cited in Crossley 2001). Taking this point further, Merleau-Ponty (1964) argues that the meaning of words is constituted not by the dependence of each word on every other and hence on the total for its meaning,

as Saussure would have it, but by the effects that words achieve and the uses to which they are put in specific interaction contexts.

To the extent that ideas are continually used in contexts other than those in which they were first developed, appropriation involves processes of change in meaning that appear to be inherent in the nature of language. The appropriation of language would appear to be difficult to resist, since the process seems to be an almost inevitable feature of the take-up of concepts that have successfully become popular. It is perhaps the case that ideas and terms become popular because they resonate with concerns and interests that have not been articulated in other spaces.

Appropriation goes beyond a benign change in meaning, however, to involve differences in political intent. The implications of using a term outside of its original context of usage are likely to be shaped as much by intent as by interests. Batliwala (2007) argues that it is important to take the subversion of feminist terms seriously since this represents a subterranean process of undermining the politics that the term was created to symbolise. The sense in which appropriation involves ‘taking possession of [meaning], especially without authority’ is of particular importance here given the focus of this article – the use of terms embedded in discourses utilised by the state (Sykes 1982: 42).

Judith Butler (2004: 223) points out that appropriation, or resignification, ‘can be used by the Right and the Left, and there are no necessarily salutary ethical consequences for “appropriation”.’ Appropriation can take place along multiple trajectories, some of which serve conservative and reactionary politics, as happened in Nazi Germany, whereas others may advance radical democratic politics, such as the opposition to apartheid. Butler argues that the determination of the ‘correctness’ or ‘value’ of different political phenomena emerging in the wake of various forms of resignification cannot, in themselves, be derived from resignification. They can only be derived from ‘a radical democratic theory and practice’.

In the contestations of existing norms or in efforts to assert hegemony, what is at stake are competing claims to knowledge by actors located in hierarchies of power. Whilst the actual hierarchies are not laid

bare, the outcome at any point in time reflects the balance of power in the discursive struggle to present a given point of view as *the* definitive statement on the subject. The NEEDS document attempts to present state discourse in general as the definitive statement on 'economic empowerment' and the reform programme which heralds its onset. Embedded within this are what have now become the obligatory references to 'women' and 'gender'.

3 Representations of 'women', 'gender' and 'empowerment'

One of the clearest signs of dominant ideas is their recurrence in similar shapes and forms in diverse texts, particularly official, governmental documents. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are a good example of a complex of ideas that has become ubiquitous: from Tanzania (PRSP Tanzania 2000) to Uganda (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development 2000) to Nigeria, the respective PRSPs all contain elements such as market-led 'growth', private sector 'development', 'good governance' and poverty reduction strategies. The power of this complex is underlined by the power of the international finance institutions that champion its effectiveness as a cure for all economic ills, despite the location of economies in complex and varying contexts.

Given the striking similarities in the overall contours of PRSPs, how does Nigeria's PRSP, or NEEDS, fare in its representations of 'women', 'gender' and 'empowerment'? This question is addressed here in two parts: the first explores that part of NEEDS that explicitly focuses on 'empowerment' – the Social Charter; the second examines the ways in which 'women' and 'gender' are treated as 'indicators' of larger social issues and processes.

3.1 Empowering women – the social charter

The social agenda underpinning the NEEDS programme, the Social Charter, states the following in its section on 'Empowering Women':

NEEDS seeks to fully integrate women by enhancing their capacity to participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the country.
(National Planning Commission 2004: 44)

From a feminist understanding of 'empowerment' as becoming more able to use power individually or

collectively to change the power relations between women and men in a given social formation, within and across social divides, we see the term 'empowerment' appropriated above and watered down to refer to 'fully integrat[ing] women ... in the ... life of the country'. This appears to be a throwback to the Women in Development (WID) approach from the 1980s. The WID ideology underlying this statement is evident from its assumption that the developmental problem facing women is constituted by barriers to women's participation in the 'life of the country'. The fact that women may already be participating – although in ways that are oppressive, exploitative or undermining of their interests – is not alluded to above. The NEEDS document clearly aims to 'integrate' women into the status quo, as opposed to transforming the power relations that shape the mainstream.

NEEDS outlines a range of measures that the document states the government will carry out. They include the use of affirmative action to ensure that women represent at least 30 per cent of the workforce, 'where feasible' (National Planning Commission 2004: 44); the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); support for legislation to abolish all forms of harmful traditional practices against women; the mainstreaming of women's concerns and perspectives in all policies and programmes; and promoting access to microfinance and other poverty alleviation strategies. Other measures involve reducing women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS by 'empowering them through sustained advocacy, education and mobilisation' (National Planning Commission 2004: 44); providing scholarships at secondary and tertiary levels of education; expanding adult and vocational education for women; increasing access for women, youth and children to information on key national issues; and providing social security for unemployed women, youth and poor children.

The assumption here is that a package that brings together single measures to address women's concerns will, in and of itself, bring about empowerment. This is a far cry from challenging the ideologies that justify gender inequality, changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over resources (as opposed to providing the resources themselves), and transforming the institutions that reinforce existing power structures (see, for example,

Batliwala 2007). Moreover, the measures above involve addressing women as a singular category, consistent with a WID emphasis, as opposed to engaging with the social relations of gender and the workings of power. Internal differences among women are not referred to here. Interventions based on affirmative action, legislation, and microfinance are aimed at increasing the space for women within the mainstream 'where feasible' but do not primarily target gendered power relations and systemic change.

In view of the widespread popular notion of education as providing a route to empowerment in Nigeria, the emphasis in the NEEDS document on education and on access to information appears laudable. However, increasing the numbers of women in discriminatory institutions or providing scholarships so that more women can attend such institutions will not be experienced as an empowering process for women (see e.g. Pereira 2007; Bennett 2002). A simple focus on expanding access to education does not begin to address the complexities of gender and other dynamics in educational processes. Existing documentation (e.g. FME 2007) presents gender-disaggregated information on a range of educational dimensions.

True to form, such reports simply lay out the statistical information but do not fully explore the meanings of the figures they present. For example, what processes underlie the huge regional variation and fluctuation in enrolment rates over the years for women/girls and men/boys? Such issues are rarely mentioned by those seeking to increase educational access for women. Yet it is an engagement with processes such as these that will be critical for changing power relations. In addition, the radical potential of expanding adult and vocational education will only be met if the content and pedagogy of such education is deeply overhauled so as to become liberatory.

Even when reference is made to 'empowering women' in the context of HIV and AIDS, it is not clear how advocacy, education and mobilisation will have this effect, without changing the ways in which sexuality, gender and power are configured in the relations between women and men. This is true more generally of the way the term 'empowerment' is used in the NEEDS document. Whilst the act of 'empowering' two key social groups – women and

youth – is highlighted in the Social Charter, there is no explicit discussion about how the measures referred to in each of the respective sections actually constitute empowerment. The reference to 'social security' at the end does not even hint at the content of such action. This is interesting in itself, given the traces of discursive struggles implied in the document's three stated pillars of 'empowering the people, promoting private enterprise and changing the way government works' (National Planning Commission 2004: xv–xx). The provision of targeted forms of social security in the NEEDS document points to the recognition of the importance of reducing (if not eliminating) poverty. The inherent tension between poverty reduction measures and privatisation is not addressed, however. Nor is it specified how privatisation will contribute to the empowerment of people, particularly women, except in the assumed equivalence between private enterprise and jobs for people. The key question of how the Social Charter will be implemented in the face of the emphasis on promoting private enterprise remains.

Since assuming office in 1999, the Obasanjo administration has pursued privatisation with inordinate zeal. The first phase of the programme involved the sale of government shares in the Lagos Stock Exchange, commercial and merchant banks, cement companies and petroleum marketing companies. Phase 2 involved hotels and vehicle assembly plants, whilst Phase 3 included the sale of the national electricity and telecommunications boards, the national fertiliser company, the national airports authority and oil refineries (Apam 2007). In January 2007 alone, 61 state-owned companies were privatised (Bako 2007).

Critics of the privatisation programme have been vociferous. They point to the fact that public properties, investments and infrastructure were sold at rock bottom prices without competitive bidding. The government has been accused of double standards in its selective application of the 'due process' requirement, applied stringently to procurement from contractors but not in its own practice. Tied to the lack of due process is the question of *who was buying up* the public assets. The company Transcorp – which bought the Hilton Hotel, the national telecommunications company and MTN, and which received special concessions from the government as 'encouragement' – is one in which Obasanjo has substantial shares (Ayobolu

2006). Friends and associates of the establishment were also said to have benefited from the sales.

With regard to social security, the government's commitment to social expenditure seems low, at best. Public expenditure on health in 2004, as a percentage of the GDP, was 1.4. In education, the figure for 1991 was 0.9 (UNDP 2007/8). The Millennium Development Goals report points out that the proportion of national expenditure allocated to social services such as health and education has been relatively low (National Planning Commission 2007). It is not clear how social security for the targeted groups – unemployed women, youth and poor children – can be effective without workable social services.

3.2 'Women' and 'gender' as indicators

In the section on 'Strengthening safety nets' (National Planning Commission 2004: 48), 'gender' is explicitly presented as a *risk* factor in the form of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, job discrimination and harmful traditional practices. The groups that are thought to be 'at-risk' are 'poor, urban and rural women, and young women'. The formal responses for dealing with these 'risks' and 'at-risk groups' include sex education at an appropriate stage in school, social welfare, counselling, the enforcement of rights, appropriate legislation, and advocacy.

'Risk' thus becomes a way of eliding sexuality and its workings in the context of gendered power relations. The use of the term 'risk' effectively becomes a way of projecting what are often the *effects* of subordination in gendered power relations and the expression of sexuality (e.g. unwanted pregnancies) onto the *particular categories of women* (e.g. young women) experiencing that disempowerment. This abstracts and ossifies the targets of policy action into discrete categories of persons, whilst obscuring the actual operations of power and disempowerment.

Where 'women' and 'gender' are not presented as 'risk' factors, they are still portrayed as 'indicators' of some larger process. Regarding HIV, for example, the NEEDS document states that prevention programmes should target 'vulnerable groups', such as 'women and children, adolescents and youth, sex workers, long distance commercial vehicle drivers, prison inmates, migrant workers and others'

(National Planning Commission 2004: 43). Regarding poverty, the gender of the head of the household is presented as a factor that has contributed to the incidence of poverty, in specified years (National Planning Commission 2004: 31). The percentage of poor male and female heads of households is given for each of a number of selected years but there is no indication as to what the figures mean. A range of instruments and interventions for the protection of 'vulnerable groups, such as women' (National Planning Commission 2004: 49) is proposed in the NEEDS document. These interventions include affirmative action to increase women's representation to 30 per cent in all programmes: education, including adult education; scholarships; access to credit and land; maternal and child health. These are the measures that the document had earlier indicated it would take to 'integrate women' into 'the life of the country' (National Planning Commission 2004: 44).

The NEEDS document manifests a particular combination of terms like 'empowerment' alongside older development discourses such as WID. Whilst the inadequacy of the WID approach has resulted in greater emphasis on gender in the development field, this does not necessarily mean that development discourse is free from the legacies of WID, as highlighted earlier. Nor does it mean that the uptake of 'gender' is free from conceptual and political problems. Its use as an *indicator* in the NEEDS document shows how the term 'gender' can also be depoliticised.

This raises the question of how gender emerges as a political issue. Judith Butler (2004) addresses this issue, pointing out that it is not synonymous with taking the structural domination of women as a necessary starting point.

To understand gender as a historical category ... is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that 'anatomy' and 'sex' are not without cultural framing ... The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself. (Butler 2004: 9–10)

Whilst feminists in the West have attempted to clarify the terms of 'gender' by distinguishing it from 'sex', Butler argues that the process of making sense of gender by connecting it to bodies is in itself a way of producing 'gender'. The result is that gender thus becomes associated with the binary of female and male bodies. Connell (2000) too, makes this point when he states that at the heart of commonsense thinking about gender in contemporary Western culture is the notion that there are two types of bodies, male and female, which are clearly distinct from one another and which form the basis for distinguishing between two different types of person. These ideas are also very much present in development discourse.

Gender is not, however, produced simply by ascription to bodies. It is in the repetition of its performance that gender is recreated and has material effects (Butler 1990). Walters (2000: 250) points out that the notion of 'performance' is generally not analysed in a way that takes enough account of the 'social and cultural contexts that enable or disable their radical enactment'. Theories of gender as performance, she argues, need to be deeply connected with the 'power of male power to constrain, control, violate and configure', in other words, the limitations and constraints within which people 'perform' gender.

In the Nigerian context, the tendency to understand gender in terms of its particular connection to women is very clear in academic as well as activist discourse, where 'gender' is often used to signify 'women'. The NEEDS document goes beyond this to refer to 'gender' as signalling 'risk', and specifies practices affecting women that provide the 'indicators' of 'gender as a risk factor'. The limitations and constraints within which gender is performed – the context – is here collapsed into the notion of gender as 'risk' in the text, thus conflating the field of power relations with 'gender' itself. The appropriation of the feminist intent of the term 'gender' is thus effected by removing power from its signification.

4 Writing the future?

After the Yar'Adua government was sworn in on 29 May 2007, the National Planning Commission presented it with a draft successor to NEEDS. The government rejected it because it made no reference to the President's Seven-Point Agenda, as spelt out in his campaign manifesto, *End Poverty,*

Develop Nigeria. At the time, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua promised Nigerians that, if elected into office, he would commit himself to confronting poverty and developing Nigeria. He would do this by way of a seven-point agenda, by addressing: (i) the energy emergency; (ii) agriculture and food security; (iii) wealth creation and poverty alleviation; (iv) land reform; (v) security of lives and property; (vi) human capital development, including compulsory education for children; and (vii) 'transport revolution', including improved mass transit. The President's agenda is silent on gender and other inequalities, and makes no mention of health or employment. The Planning Commission was subsequently directed to work on NEEDS 2, the next blueprint for economic policy which was to incorporate the President's seven-point agenda.

Also on the table is Nigeria's Vision 20–2020, which has its roots in scenarios generated by the New York-based investment banking group, Goldman Sachs. In their efforts to determine the prospects of a country realising its growth potential and becoming globally competitive, Goldman Sachs made projections about which countries would become the 20 largest economies in the world by the year 2025. Nigeria comes 18th on their list. Drawing on the Goldman Sachs projections, the Obasanjo administration knocked five years off the 2025 date and came up with Vision 20–2020 (Igbuzor 2007). This numerical oddity refers to the government's intention that, by the year 2020, Nigeria should become one of the top 20 economies in the world.

In line with this, the vision statement for Vision 20–2020 pronounces that:

By 2020 Nigeria will be one of the 20 largest economies in the world able to consolidate its leadership role in Africa and establish itself as a significant player in the global economic and political arena.
(The Presidency 2008: 6)

The statement that Nigeria should become one of the 20 largest economies in the world in just over a decade – despite the government's manifest inability to ensure stable water and electricity supplies, and health and education for Nigerian women and men, amongst other problems – is presented as if this were a serious proposition. The vision statement is silent on improving the conditions of life for Nigerian

people, let alone advancing a vision of social transformation and gender justice. In fact, references to 'gender' and 'empowerment' have disappeared from the text. Whilst the document acknowledges that there is a need to go beyond the catch phrase of becoming 'one of the 20 largest economies by 2020' and that an essential factor in the attainment of the vision is 'a clear definition which spells out the goals to be achieved in all the key sectors and aspects of the nation's economic, social and political life' (The Presidency 2008: 8), there is no such definition in the Vision 20–2020 document. At present, Vision 20–2020 is to be merged with NEEDS 2 and Yar'Adua's seven-point agenda to form the National Development Plan (NDP). Whilst the specific content is yet to be revealed, all the indications are that the Plan will adhere to the neoliberal tenets of the preceding blueprints, which combine privatisation and market-led 'growth' with poverty reduction measures.

5 Appropriation, erasure and power

Neoliberal agendas are adopted and legitimated in specific contexts. It is necessary to understand these contexts and the trajectories of legitimation taken by states in the pursuit of such agendas. This article has focused on the processes involved in the Obasanjo administration's appropriation of progressive language and meanings in its economic empowerment and development strategy, NEEDS, from 1999 to 2007. I have argued that the Obasanjo administration has 'taken possession of [meaning], especially without authority' in ways that are apparently gender neutral, through its presentation of its economic and development agenda as partitioned from political practice, as well as in ways

that are more specifically oriented to the terms 'gender' and 'empowerment'. On both tracks, appropriation has involved the erasure of power in the production of altered meanings.

State agencies' adoption of terms developed in one context to mean something quite different in another context, go beyond benign changes in meaning to involve differences in intent and political interests. The significance of these interests have been highlighted here by reference not simply to meaning as embodied in language but as crucially located in practice beyond the text. Whilst NEEDS attempts to advance hegemony in tokenistic gestures towards 'consultation' and 'participation', the legacies of militarism and authoritarianism in the casting of dissent as illegitimate still prevail in Nigeria's transition to civilian rule.

This terrain is a key arena in which the struggle to reclaim feminism in the pursuit of social and economic justice in Nigeria has to be fought. This article is intended to contribute to this process by exposing opportunistic appropriations of feminist and other progressive ideas by the state. A deeper understanding of ideas pertaining to 'the economy', 'politics', 'justice' and 'power', the contexts in which they are taken up and resignified, the actors involved and their differing political agendas is also necessary. Ultimately, more nuanced and sophisticated feminist knowledge about the workings of power – including ways in which feminist conceptions of women's empowerment might be realised – needs to be produced. In this endeavour, the strength to be drawn from cross-disciplinary work and cross-border feminist networks is crucial.

Notes

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2 Charmaine Pereira is the National Coordinator of the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria, based in Abuja.
3 My emphasis.

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