JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES
Volume 2, Number 1 (March 2026)
ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-060X (print)
Website: https://jppssuniuyo.com/jpci **Email:** jppssuniuyo@gmail.com
Received: March 24, 2026 **Accepted**: March 29, 2026 **Published**: March 31, 2026
Citation: Nkama, Uchenna N. (2026). "Decolonising the Master's House: Intersectional Feminist Critiques of Patriarchal Knowledge Production and the Quest for Epistemic Justice in African Academia." *Journal of Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 2 (1): 12-29.
Article **Open Access**

DECOLONISING THE MASTER'S HOUSE: INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF PATRIARCHAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND THE QUEST FOR EPISTEMIC JUSTICE IN AFRICAN ACADEMIA

Uchenna Nympha Nkama
Department of Philosophy, Rivers State University, Nigeria
Email: nymphauchenna05@gmail.com

Abstract
African academia remains deeply shaped by colonial legacies and patriarchal structures that perpetuate Eurocentric knowledge production, systematically marginalising women's voices, indigenous epistemologies, and localised ways of knowing. This article examines feminist critiques of these dynamics, highlighting how intersectional oppressions, rooted in gender, race, class, and colonial histories, continue to exclude African women from authoritative positions in knowledge creation. Drawing on African feminist scholarship and decolonial thought through content analysis and hermeneutics methods, it investigates feminist epistemology, capitalist patriarchy, and epistemic justice, arguing that traditional academic frameworks often reproduce exclusionary practices that privilege Western methodologies over communal, oral, and indigenous traditions. The analysis integrates insights from social movements, empirical studies on female academics' experiences, and theoretical contributions from scholars such as Amina Mama, Sylvia Tamale, and Catherine Kiprop. These critiques reveal tensions between developmental feminism's integrationist approaches and more radical calls for dismantling patriarchal and capitalist systems. Finally, the article advocates for transformative epistemic justice, decolonising curricula, valorising horizontal cross-pollination of forms of knowledge, fostering inclusive feminist research practices, and building institutional mechanisms to center African women's lived realities and contributions. This paper concludes by reframing knowledge production as a site of resistance and equity, offering pathways toward a more just and representative academic landscape across the continent.

Keywords: African Feminism, Decolonisation, Epistemic Justice, Patriarchal Knowledge Production;, Intersectionality, Higher Education in Africa.

Introduction

African academia continues to bear the profound imprint of colonial legacies fused with enduring patriarchal structures, resulting in a system of knowledge production that remains predominantly Eurocentric, masculinist, and exclusionary (Kiprop, 2025; Badat, 2023; Abudu, 2022). Formal education systems across the continent, inherited from colonial administrations, have long privileged Western epistemologies while systematically marginalising indigenous ways of knowing, oral traditions, communal practices, and localised perspectives (Jackson, 2023; Mookerjee, 2024; Wangui, 2024). Universities in Africa often function as sites where knowledge is constructed through hierarchies that echo colonial power relations, prioritising written, abstract, individualistic scholarship over collective, experiential, and contextual forms of understanding. This patriarchal knowledge production is both an epistemic preference and a mechanism of control, as it determines whose experiences count as legitimate knowledge, who is authorised to produce it, and whose voices are rendered invisible or peripheral (Kiprop, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020). Within this trajectory, women, particularly black, indigenous, and working-class African women, encounter compounded barriers. Patriarchal norms embedded in institutional cultures assign disproportionate domestic and reproductive responsibilities to women, limit their access to research time, international opportunities, and leadership roles, and perpetuate gender-insensitive environments rife with harassment and biased evaluation practices (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Sougou et al., 2022). These dynamics intersect with racial and class hierarchies inherited from colonialism and, in contexts like South Africa, apartheid. The result is a knowledge economy that continues to exorcise or erase African realities while upholding European standards of value, authority, and rigour. Museums, curricula, and research agenda frequently reproduce "Othering" processes, constructing African identities through a Western gaze that sidelines contributions from female scholars, traditional healers, artists, and community practitioners (Mookerjee, 2024; Wangui, 2024; Jackson, 2023; Shabalala, 2025; Badat, 2023; Abudu, 2022).

The significance of feminist critiques lies in their rigorous intersectional analysis, which refuses to treat gender in isolation but examines how it intertwines with race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and colonial histories to shape experiences in higher education (Rosenbloom & Killian, 2013; Mama & Barnes, 2007; East African Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2020; Hoto, 2024). Intersectionality, as developed by Black feminist thought and adapted within African contexts, reveals how multiple axes of oppression operate simultaneously to exclude women from authoritative positions in knowledge creation (Okeke, 1996). Feminist scholars argue that patriarchal knowledge production is not neutral but actively reproduces capitalist patriarchy, where economic exploitation and gender subordination reinforce one another through neoliberal metrics of productivity, output-based funding, and market-driven university reforms (Okeke, 1996; Prah & Maggott, 2020; Badat, 2023; Abudu, 2022). Through centering women's lived realities, African feminisms challenge the notion that knowledge resides exclusively within Eurocentric academia, advocating instead for the valorisation of Indigenous epistemologies and "horizontal cross-pollination" between local and relevant Western practices (Subramaniam, 2024; Mookerjee, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020; Nzegwu, 2006).

These critiques have gained renewed urgency through contemporary campus-led movements, most notably #RhodesMustFall (beginning in 2015 at the University of Cape Town), #FeesMustFall (spreading across South African universities in 2015-2016). Originally sparked by demands to remove colonial symbols (such as the Cecil Rhodes statue) and

address financial exclusion, these movements rapidly expanded to interrogate deeper structural issues, including the persistence of racist, patriarchal, and capitalist frameworks in higher education (Prah & Maggott, 2020; Wang, 2025). Activists highlighted how universities remain exclusionary spaces, racially hierarchical, financially inaccessible, and epistemically colonial, while also reproducing patriarchal behaviours internally (Dlakavu, 2015). Feminist participants in these movements insisted on visibility for gender-based oppressions, confronting male comrades who sidelined "women's issues" in favour of racial or class struggles, and emphasising that true decolonisation must dismantle intersecting systems of domination (Kiprop, 2025; Dlakavu, 2015; Wang, 2025). The movements exposed tensions, including how patriarchal tendencies within activist spaces marginalised feminist voices, yet they also catalysed broader calls for institutional reform, gender equity policies, and epistemic transformation.

This article contends that feminist critiques offer a vital pathway to dismantle patriarchal knowledge production in African academia and advance epistemic justice. By interrogating who holds power in knowledge creation, how colonial and patriarchal paradigms perpetuate exclusion, and what transformative alternatives exist, these critiques seek not simple inclusion within existing structures but a fundamental reimagining of academic landscapes to reflect the diverse realities of African women and marginalised communities (Mama, 2011a; Kiprop, 2024). The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides historical context, tracing colonial legacies in education and the evolution of feminist perspectives on knowledge production. Next, it outlines the theoretical framework, defining core concepts such as knowledge production, intersectionality, feminist epistemology, capitalist patriarchy, and African feminisms. The subsequent section delves into feminist critiques, exploring intersectional thought, research practices centred on women's experiences, and the imperative of epistemic justice. Empirical insights follow through case studies, including challenges faced by female academics, the Fees Must Fall movement's push for transformation, leadership disparities, and debates around developmental feminism. Contemporary issues are then examined, focusing on institutional barriers, activist responses (such as gender equity offices), and the role of decolonial feminist thought. Finally, the article considers future directions for sustaining feminist channels in academia to foster gender equity and broader societal change. Through this analysis, the article moves beyond superficial reforms to cultivate inclusive, anti-imperialist, and anti-sexist academic spaces. This entails decentering Eurocentric methodologies, integrating indigenous and feminist knowledge, systems, challenging interlocking oppressions of patriarchy and capitalism, and building institutional mechanisms that uplift African women's contributions (Mama, 2011b; Mwaura & Balliah, 2024). Such transformation holds promise not only for equitable knowledge production but for redefining higher education as a site of resistance, liberation, and collective flourishing across the continent.

Milieu of Feminist Critiques in African Academia

The historical context of feminist critiques in African academia reveals a complex interplay of colonial legacies, patriarchal structures, and contemporary movements for gender equity, demanding an urgent need to "recenter" indigenous ways of knowing and challenge methodologies that have historically marginalised African perspectives (Mookerjee, 2024, citing influences like Linda Tuhiwai Smith). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work on decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2008), while rooted in Māori contexts, has profoundly influenced African feminist scholarship by providing tools to critique imperial research paradigms, expose epistemic violence, and advocate for respectful, community-centered

knowledge practices that disrupt coloniser-colonised hierarchies (see also applications in African contexts via Uduagwu, 2020). The colonial encounter entrenched hegemonic knowledge systems that prioritise Western epistemologies, thereby shaping the educational frameworks in African universities and perpetuating exclusion long after formal independence.

Colonial Legacies in Education: The formal education system in Africa has often perpetuated colonial ideologies, embedding Eurocentric narratives and marginalising local knowledge systems. Colonial powers designed education primarily to produce compliant administrators, labourers, and intermediaries who internalised Western superiority, using schools to instill values of individualism, linear progress, and scientific rationality while dismissing African communal, oral, and spiritual epistemologies as primitive or superstitious (Mookerjee, 2024; Wangui, M. (2024; Jackson, 2023; Abudu, 2022). Curricula emphasised European history, literature, and sciences, often omitting or distorting African contributions, such as detailed accounts of pre-colonial African universities (e.g., Sankore in Timbuktu) or resistance movements, while glorifying imperial achievements. This created "epistemological apartheid," where indigenous knowledge was relegated to folklore or irrelevance, and colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) became gatekeepers of legitimate scholarship (Mookerjee, 2024). Institutions like universities were modelled on European prototypes, separating theory from practice and privileging abstract, written knowledge over experiential or collective forms. Museums, as extensions of academic representation, functioned as vehicles for cultural domination, displaying African artifacts (e.g., Benin bronzes, masks) as exotic relics of "savage" people, decontextualised from their spiritual, communal, or functional significance (Mbu, 2023). Such representations reinforced racial and gender hierarchies, exorcising African bodies and cultures through a Western lens, often leading to the ‘Othering’ of African populations (Mookerjee, 2024). At Post-independence, many African states retained these structures due to neocolonial economic dependencies and elite capture, sustaining Eurocentric biases in curricula, research funding, and publication standards that favour Western journals and methodologies (Kiprop, 2024). These legacies continue to shape who is deemed a "knowledge producer," marginalising women and non-elite voices whose contributions, through oral traditions, healing practices, or community activism, are dismissed as unscientific.

Feminist Perspectives on Knowledge Production and Indigenous Epistemologies: Feminist scholars have highlighted the necessity of decolonising African academia to create anti-imperialist, anti-sexist spaces inclusive of local knowledge (Jackson, 2023; Shabalala, 2025; Mama & Barnes, 2007; Subramaniam, 2024; Nzegwu, 2006; Smith, 2008; Mbu, 2023). Patriarchal knowledge production intersects with coloniality to exclude women's experiences, treating them as secondary while privileging masculinist, rationalist paradigms. African feminists argue for valorising indigenous practitioners, such as traditional healers, griots, artists, and midwives, whose holistic, relational epistemologies integrate spirituality, community, and ecology, challenging the Eurocentric confinement of knowledge to academic silos (Mookerjee, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020). Central to this is the reclamation of Indigenous epistemologies, which emphasise ubuntu ("I am because we are"), communal harmony, and praxis-oriented wisdom over individualistic abstraction. Colonialism imposed binary gender constructs tied to capitalist exploitation, separating productive (male/public) from reproductive (female/private) spheres, erasing pre-colonial fluidities (e.g., non-binary roles in some African societies) and subordinating women (Mookerjee, 2024). Feminist

epistemology thus seeks to dismantle these patriarchal structures by centring women's lived realities and advocating inclusive knowledge creation that recognises diverse systems, including localised understandings (Mama, 2011b; Uduagwu, 2020). A key proposal in feminist epistemology is the "horizontal cross-pollination" of ideas, the respectful, non-hierarchical exchanges between indigenous knowledges and relevant Western practices, contrasting neoliberal vertical models that commodify knowledge (Tamale, 2020; Mookerjee, 2024; Subramaniam, 2024; Knowles, 2021). This fosters synergy across geo-cultures, disciplines, and philosophies, e.g., blending oral storytelling with critical theory or community-based healing with evidence-based research, while avoiding new hegemonies (Mookerjee, 2024). Such approaches democratise epistemic spaces, promote open-access scholarship, and subvert gatekeeping by corporate publishers, enabling African women to reclaim authority in knowledge production.

Contemporary Movements and Institutional Power Dynamics

Recent movements, such as #RhodesMustFall (2015, University of Cape Town) and #FeesMustFall (2015–2016, spreading nationwide in South Africa), underscore demands for education reflecting African students' diverse realities and urgent institutional reforms (Prah & Maggott, 2020). Sparked by colonial symbols (e.g., Rhodes statue) and financial exclusion, these protests critiqued patriarchal, capitalist, and racist structures dominating higher education, exposing universities as exclusionary spaces that reproduce hierarchies in curricula, funding, and campus culture (Kiprop, 2025). Feminist voices within these movements highlighted gender intersections, confronting patriarchal behaviours among male activists who sidelined "women's issues" or perpetuated harassment and queer-antagonism. Sub-movements like #PatriarchyMustFall and #EndRapeCulture emerged to address sexual violence, ableism, and marginalisation of queer/trans voices, insisting decolonisation must dismantle intersecting oppressions (Prah & Maggott, 2020). These efforts revealed tensions. While movements advanced epistemic critique (e.g., decolonising curricula), internal patriarchies often alienated feminist participants, who insist that true transformation requires centring gender equity alongside racial and economic justice. Similar dynamics have unfolded in Nigeria, and the most prominent and directly analogous movement is the #SexForGrades campaign, ignited by the BBC Africa Eye undercover documentary *Sex for Grades: Undercover Inside Nigerian and Ghanaian Universities* (released October 2019). It exposed lecturers at the University of Lagos (UNILAG) and other institutions coercing female students into sex for grades or academic favours (Egbunike, 2019). Building on #SexForGrades momentum, protests occurred in 2023 at the University of Calabar and Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK, Awka), demanding action on lecturer harassment. On International Women’s Day (March 8, 2026), feminist-led organisation Alliances for Africa (AfA) released a baseline survey across 12 public universities (six federal, six state, covering all geopolitical zones). Findings show that 70% of female students and 63% of female staff experienced GBV/sexual harassment; 42.2% reported unwanted touching, comments, or stalking. The survey underpins AfA’s 5-year (2023-2028) programme with university Gender Studies centres to eradicate harassment. These movements catalysed calls for policies promoting inclusion, challenging male-dominated institutional cultures that marginalise female voices and experiences (Kiprop, 2025). They link historical colonial legacies to present power dynamics, reinforcing feminist demands for epistemic justice and transformative change in African academia.

Analysis of Key Concepts

The core theoretical concepts underpinning feminist critiques of patriarchal knowledge production in African academia include knowledge production, intersectionality, feminist epistemology, capitalist patriarchy, and African feminisms. These frameworks provide an analytical lens for understanding systemic exclusions and envisioning transformative alternatives. Drawing from key scholars, they highlight how colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist forces intersect to shape academic landscapes, while offering pathways toward epistemic justice and inclusion.

Knowledge Production: Knowledge production refers to the institutionalised processes of creating, researching, analysing, documenting, and disseminating ideas that contribute to different understandings of social, cultural, and political phenomena within academic settings (Kiprop, 2024; Jackson, 2023; Abudu, 2022). In African higher education, these processes are deeply politicised, as they determine whose perspectives are legitimised as "knowledge" and who is authorised to produce it. Historically shaped by colonial legacies, knowledge production privileges Eurocentric methodologies, emphasising objectivity, individualism, abstraction, and written texts, while marginalising indigenous, communal, oral, experiential, and relational forms of knowing (Mookerjee, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020). Feminist critiques expose how patriarchal norms within these processes sideline women's contributions, treating their experiences as anecdotal or supplementary rather than central to theory-building. For instance, traditional healers, griots, midwives, and community activists, often women, generate holistic knowledge integrating spirituality, ecology, and praxis, yet such epistemologies are dismissed as unscientific or folkloric under Eurocentric standards (Mookerjee, 2024). This exclusion perpetuates epistemic injustice, where dominant paradigms reproduce power asymmetries tied to gender, race, and coloniality. Feminist interventions thus call for democratizing knowledge production: decentering Western gatekeeping (e.g., publication in high-impact journals), promoting open-access models, and fostering community-engaged scholarship that values localised wisdom (Kiprop, 2024; Mama, 2011a).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality serves as a foundational analytical framework for examining how overlapping social categorisations, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and colonial histories, interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege (East African Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2020; Hoto, 2024). Originating in Black feminist thought (notably Kimberlé Crenshaw), intersectionality has been adapted within African contexts to address how multiple axes of domination converge in higher education and knowledge production (Okeke, 1996). In African academia, intersectionality reveals that gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation from racial hierarchies inherited from colonialism and apartheid, class-based exclusions under neoliberal reforms, or ethnic and regional disparities. For example, Black working-class women face compounded barriers: disproportionate domestic responsibilities limit research time, gender-insensitive cultures perpetuate harassment, and racial biases restrict access to leadership or funding (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Sougou et al., 2022). Intersectional analysis challenges single-issue approaches, insisting that feminist critiques must address interlocking structures, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism to achieve meaningful equity. It informs advocacy for inclusive policies that centre marginalised voices and dismantle systemic inequalities simultaneously (Hoto, 2024; Prah & Maggott, 2020).

Feminist Epistemology: Feminist epistemology challenges traditional epistemological foundations that exclude or misrepresent women's experiences, knowledge, and ways of knowing (Uduagwu, 2020; Mama, 2011a). It critiques the presumed neutrality of dominant paradigms, often masculinist, rationalist, and detached, arguing that knowledge is situated, embodied, and shaped by power relations. In African contexts, feminist epistemology seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures within academia by promoting inclusive, reflexive approaches that recognise diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous and localised forms (Mookerjee, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020). Scholars emphasise producing knowledge "on women, by women, and for women," documenting lived experiences and activism while prioritising ethical, participatory methods that avoid exploitative dynamics (Mama, 2011b). This involves reflexive engagement with research processes, centring marginalised perspectives, and rejecting hierarchies that privilege Western theory over African praxis. Feminist epistemology thus advocates for epistemic justice: interrogating who holds epistemic authority, how knowledge is validated, and how patriarchal exclusions are reproduced. By integrating relational, communal, and experiential epistemologies, it fosters transformative scholarship that uplifts African women's realities (Mama, 2011a; Okeke, 1996).

Capitalist Patriarchy: The concept of capitalist patriarchy underscores the intrinsic, mutually reinforcing relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, where economic exploitation and gender subordination intertwine to perpetuate oppression (Prah & Maggott, 2020). In African academia, neoliberal reforms, market-driven funding, performance metrics, and privatisation intensify patriarchal dynamics: productivity demands exacerbate women's unequal domestic burdens, while hierarchical structures favour male leadership and Western-oriented research (Prah & Maggott, 2020). This framework asserts that gender inequalities in knowledge production cannot be addressed without confronting capitalism's commodification of labour, time, and knowledge. Women's unwaged care work subsidises academic productivity, while capitalist patriarchy reproduces exclusion through gendered divisions of labour and resource access. Feminist critiques call for challenging these interlocking systems, economic exploitation, gender subordination, and colonial legacies, to enable genuine transformation. Dismantling capitalist patriarchy requires collective action against neoliberal university models and the advocacy of equitable resource distribution and anti-capitalist feminist praxis (Prah & Maggott, 2020; Mama, 2011b).

African Feminism: African feminism addresses the distinct historical, cultural, and colonial contexts shaping African women's struggles, identities, and contributions to feminist thought (Hoto, 2024; Okeke, 1996). Rejecting universalist Western feminism, it reclaims African women's narratives, emphasising intersectional analyses that account for colonialism, race, class, and localised patriarchies (Hoto, 2024). Rooted in communal values like ubuntu, African feminism critique imposes gender binaries and capitalist divisions that subordinated women, while valorising pre-colonial fluidities and pluralistic systems (Mookerjee, 2024). African feminists advocate decolonised knowledge production through centring indigenous epistemologies, challenging epistemic apartheid, and promoting inclusive frameworks that respect diverse realities (Mookerjee, 2024; Uduagwu, 2020). They highlight women's agency in resistance through activism, scholarship, and community practices, while advocating for epistemic justice that uplifts marginalised voices. By integrating intersectionality and anti-capitalist critiques, African feminisms offer transformative visions for academia as a site of equity, liberation, and collective flourishing (Mama, 2011a; Prah & Maggott, 2020). These

theories have some weak points, such as the paradox of bias, relativism, circular reasoning, Essentialism, which projects women's essences above every other thing. However, together, these concepts form a robust framework for interrogating patriarchal knowledge production and advancing feminist decolonial goals in African academia.

Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Knowledge Production

Feminist critiques of patriarchal knowledge production in African academia highlight the systemic barriers and challenges women face in the educational landscape. These critiques emphasise the need to acknowledge gender-specific struggles and the complex intersections of race, class, and gender in knowledge production processes (Hoto, 2024; Benya & Frehiwot, 2024). Feminists argue that traditional epistemic practices are often entrenched in patriarchal paradigms, which hinder meaningful change. Audre Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" serves as a foundational premise for these critiques, advocating for a transformative approach grounded in feminist principles rather than mere reform within existing oppressive structures (Prah & Maggott, 2020; Nayak, 2013, see also Lorde, 2007 (1984), as widely applied in decolonial and African feminist scholarship).

Intersectionality in Feminist Thought: Critiques from various strands of feminism, particularly socialist feminism, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Carol Hanisch, and Hyde Park Chapter, emphasise the intersections of economic and cultural oppression (Sertel, 2025; Fiveable, 2024; StudySmarter, 2022). They argue that the liberation of women cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying structures of capitalism and patriarchy (Mama, 2011b). Socialist feminism in African contexts, especially South Africa and Nigeria, has historically linked gender struggles to broader anti-capitalist and anti-racist movements, viewing patriarchy as intertwined with class exploitation and racial domination. In South Africa, socialist feminists have connected their activism to the trade union movement, focusing on collective fights against both economic and gender-based oppression. During apartheid and into the post-apartheid era, women's organisations within unions (such as COSATU affiliates) mobilised around issues like wage inequality, reproductive rights, and workplace harassment, framing gender liberation as inseparable from class struggle and workers' rights (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019; Prah & Maggott, 2020). This approach challenges the notion that gender struggles can be understood in isolation, advocating for a broader analysis that includes the effects of racialization and racism within feminist movements (Benya & Frehiwot, 2024; Prah & Maggott, 2020). In Nigeria, feminist-driven activism has focused on patriarchal power abuses within universities, especially sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) that undermine women's access to equitable knowledge production and academic authority. These movements challenge male lecturers' exploitation of grading power (a direct form of patriarchal control over epistemic processes) and have led to investigations, policy pushes, and institutional reforms.

While Nigeria's movements appear less symbolic/decolonial compared to Rhodes, they are strongly intersectional and feminist, exposing how patriarchal institutional cultures marginalise female voices and bodies. Student activists, including feminist participants, critiqued how patriarchal and capitalist structures in universities perpetuated exclusion, financial barriers disproportionately affected working-class Black women, while epistemic colonialism marginalised their knowledges. Feminist interventions within these movements pushed for recognition that decolonisation must address intersecting oppressions, including internal patriarchal dynamics among male comrades who often sidelined gender issues (Prah

& Maggott, 2020). Socialist feminist thought thus provides a lens for understanding how capitalist patriarchy operates in academia: neoliberal reforms prioritise market metrics over equity, intensifying gendered and classed exclusions while reinforcing male-dominated leadership.

Feminist Research Practices: Feminist researchers in African contexts have developed methodologies that reflect the necessity of 'doing research' with a feminist lens. This includes producing knowledge that is "on women, by women, and for women," which serves to document the lived experiences and activism of women in various socio-political contexts (Mama, 2011b; Cescutti-Butler, 2017). Such practices prioritise ethical, reflexive, and participatory approaches that avoid extractive dynamics common in traditional research. Rather than objectifying subjects, feminist methodologies center women's agency, voices, and epistemologies, often employing narrative, oral histories, and community-engaged methods. In African academia, this means challenging masculinist norms that dismiss experiential knowledge as biased or unscientific, instead valuing relational, embodied, and contextual ways of knowing (Mama, 2011b; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019). The academic environment itself becomes a site of struggle, where women scholars navigate feelings of inadequacy amid predominantly masculine discourses (Sader, 2014; Abbas, 2014). These practices facilitate radical refusal against patriarchal norms, creating feminist intellectual spaces for reflexive engagement with research processes and outcomes. By documenting activism, such as women's roles in student movements or community resistance, feminist research counters marginalisation, builds solidarity, and contributes to transformative knowledge that serves women's liberation rather than reinforcing dominant paradigms (Mama, 2011b).

The Call for Epistemic Justice: Central to feminist critiques is the call for epistemic justice, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of knowledge production that uplifts marginalised voices (Jackson, 2023; Shabalala, 2025; Abudu, 2022; Mama & Barnes, 2007; Rosenbloom & Killian, 2013; Subramaniam, 2024; Nzegwu, 2006; Smith, 2008; Nayak, 2013; Lorde, 2007; Sertel, 2025; Cescutti-Butler, 2017). Feminist epistemologies challenge dominant paradigms by interrogating who holds the power in knowledge creation and how those power dynamics perpetuate systemic inequalities (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024). Audre Lorde's famous declaration, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", resonates deeply here, warning that relying on colonial, patriarchal, or capitalist tools (e.g., Eurocentric methodologies, hierarchical publishing, neoliberal metrics) cannot achieve genuine liberation; they may offer temporary gains but ultimately reproduce the oppressive structures (Prah & Maggott, 2020; Lorde, 1984, as invoked in African decolonial feminist discourse).

In African academia, epistemic injustice manifests in the devaluation of indigenous and women's forms of knowledge, the underrepresentation of female scholars in leadership and journals, and the persistence of Western validation standards (Kiprop, 2024; Mookerjee, 2024). Power dynamics determine whose research is funded, published, cited, and deemed authoritative, often excluding Black women whose contributions are sidelined by intersecting biases. The quest for epistemic justice thus involves not only advocating for women's rights but critically examining how knowledge is constructed, disseminated, and valued (Hoto, 2024; Abbas, 2014). Feminist calls emphasize building alternative epistemic frameworks: decolonising curricula, promoting open-access and community-based scholarship, and fostering horizontal exchanges that respect diverse epistemologies. This

transformative vision seeks to reframe academia as a space for equity and resistance, dismantling patriarchal power rather than integrating into it (Mama, 2011a; Uduagwu, 2020). Through these critiques, intersectional analysis, women-centred research, and epistemic justice, feminist scholarship in African academia challenges patriarchal knowledge production at its core, paving the way for inclusive, liberatory alternatives.

Case Studies and Empirical Insights

Evidence and case studies illustrate how the lived realities of women in African academia ground feminist critiques in concrete experiences. Drawing from phenomenological research, movement analyses, historical legacies, leadership data, and theoretical debates, these cases highlight persistent barriers while underscoring potentials for transformation.

Challenges Against Female Academics: Phenomenological studies reveal the multifaceted challenges confronting female academics, particularly those in leadership roles. A key study by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) employed descriptive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of female faculty deans in South African universities. Participants reported significant barriers, including financial constraints, inadequate curricular resources, logistical issues in academic supervision, and gendered relational dynamics, most notably concerns about sexual harassment and microaggressions in male-dominated environments. These women described navigating "double shifts" of professional demands and domestic responsibilities, compounded by institutional cultures that undervalued their contributions and questioned their authority. The study emphasised how such challenges erode career progression, foster isolation, and perpetuate feelings of inadequacy amid patriarchal norms (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Complementing this, research on female graduate students across African universities highlights early-stage exclusions. Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2019) examined voice, power, and responsibility in graduate training, finding that women face policy and funding shortages that threaten program quality, alongside gendered mentoring deficits and expectations to prioritise family over research. These phenomenological insights reveal systemic patterns: women encounter intersecting oppressions that limit epistemic participation, from resource scarcity to harassment, reinforcing patriarchal knowledge hierarchies (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Broader studies in West Africa and Tanzania echo these findings. Sougou et al. (2022) identified family-related burdens and gender-insensitive cultures as key barriers for women scientists, while Tarimo and Swai (2024) documented senior female academics in Tanzanian public universities facing similar work-life conflicts, limited mentorship, and institutional biases that hinder advancement (Tarimo & Swai, 2024; Sougou et al., 2022).

Fees Must Fall Movement and Institutional Transformation: The Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa and Nigeria serves as a pivotal case study illustrating the intersection of gender, epistemic critique, and institutional change. While primarily addressing financial exclusion and decolonisation, the movement exposed patriarchal structures within universities and activist spaces. Feminist participants articulated profound alienation from dominant epistemic practices that marginalised women's voices, viewing this disconnection as a catalyst for transformation (Prah & Maggott, 2020). Women leaders in the movement at institutions like the University of Johannesburg and the University of the Witwatersrand navigated gender bias, including the sidelining of "women's issues" by male comrades and internal harassment. Sub-movements like Patriarchy Must Fall, End Rape Culture, and Sex for Marks campaigns emerged to confront sexual violence and exclusion, insisting that true decolonisation requires dismantling intersecting oppressions (Prah & Maggott, 2020;

Egbunike, 2019). The movement's articulations of alienation, rooted in feminist theory, highlighted how patriarchal and capitalist frameworks alienate women from knowledge production, yet also fostered demands for gender equity policies, inclusive curricula, and transformed institutional cultures (Kiprop, 2025). This case demonstrates how student activism can expose and challenge patriarchal knowledge dynamics, though internal gender tensions limited full transformation.

Post-Apartheid South Africa: Gender and Racial Legacies: The transition from apartheid to democracy left enduring gender and racial inequalities in South African higher education. Post-1994 reforms aimed at equity, but universities retained legacies of segregationist policies that marginalised Black women in particular (Tarimo & Swai, 2024). Women's organisations channelled feminist struggles into nationalist agendas during the transition, yet co-option risked diluting specific gender aims (Tarimo & Swai, 2024). Empirical accounts reveal ongoing disparities: Black women face compounded barriers from racial hierarchies and patriarchal norms, including limited access to resources and leadership. These legacies manifest in epistemic exclusion, where curricula and research prioritise Eurocentric perspectives, and institutional cultures that reinforce feelings of inferiority among female scholars (Sader, 2014; Abbas, 2014). Post-apartheid progress has been uneven, with persistent underrepresentation underscoring the need for deeper transformation beyond formal policies (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019).

Leadership Representation: Comparative analyses of leadership at prominent South African universities, University of Johannesburg, Stellenbosch University, University of the Witwatersrand, and University of Cape Town, between 2005 and 2020, reveal stark gender and racial disparities. Data indicate slow advances in female representation, but white male dominance persists in key roles such as Vice Chancellor and faculty deans (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019; Tarimo & Swai, 2024). Women, especially black women, remain underrepresented in senior positions, reflecting broader patriarchal and post-apartheid legacies. A similar pattern is evident in the Nigerian higher education system (Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024). According to the *Nigeria University Statistical Digest* (2019), there were 73,443 academics in the country, comprising 56,063 men and 17,380 women. The gender disparity is even more pronounced at the professorial level, where men accounted for 85% of professors, compared to just 15% women. Furthermore, as of 2019, women occupied fewer than 35% of senior academic positions, including principal officer roles (Kurga, 2022, cited by Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024). Corroborating this trend, Omotoso (2020) found that while women's representation has improved at middle-level faculty positions, this progress has not translated into senior leadership roles. This indicates that key decision-making and accountability positions within Nigerian higher education remain overwhelmingly dominated by men. These patterns highlight how institutional gatekeeping, biased promotions, networking exclusions, and gendered expectations limit women's epistemic authority. Recent systematic reviews confirm persistent barriers despite equity policies, with gaps in implementation and cultural resistance (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024). This case underscores the need for targeted interventions to achieve representative leadership.

Developmental Feminism and Integration vs. Transformative Change: The concept of "developmental feminism" in African contexts reflects tensions between integrating women into existing frameworks and pursuing radical transformation (Ani & Uwizeyimana, 2021; Okoli, 2021; Chioma, 2005). This approach often advocates mainstreaming gender into

development discourses and institutions, e.g., increasing female enrollment or leadership quotas, without fundamentally challenging patriarchal underpinnings (Mama, 2011b). While developmental strategies address surface inequalities (e.g., policy inclusion), critics argue they risk co-optation, diluting feminist goals by aligning with neoliberal or nationalist agendas (Mama, 2011b; Prah & Maggott, 2020). Transformative change, by contrast, demands dismantling interlocking systems of capitalist patriarchy and coloniality, as seen in calls for epistemic justice and alternative forms of knowledge (Mookerjee, 2024). The debate highlights a core feminist tension: integration offers pragmatic gains but may reinforce structures, while transformation requires sustained activism to foster genuine equity. These cases collectively demonstrate the empirical weight of feminist critiques, revealing barriers while pointing to pathways for decolonial, gender-just academia.

Contemporary Issues

The landscape of feminist critiques in African academia remains marked by persistent struggles against interlocking forms of oppression that disproportionately affect women scholars and activists. Despite incremental policy gains, systemic barriers continue to hinder gender equity, while activist responses and evolving feminist thought offer pathways for resistance and change. This section examines key contemporary challenges and responses, focusing on institutional barriers, activist initiatives, and the role of decolonial feminist perspectives.

Institutional Barriers: African women in academia face significant institutional barriers that impede career development and epistemic participation. Recent studies consistently identify family and environment-related challenges as primary obstacles, with women bearing disproportionate domestic and caregiving responsibilities that reduce research productivity, publication output, and opportunities for advancement (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Sougou et al., 2022; Shabalala, 2025; Nzegwu, 2006). These burdens are exacerbated by rigid academic timelines, such as "publish or perish" metrics, that fail to accommodate life stages involving motherhood or elder care, leading to slower progression and higher attrition rates among female academics. A gender-insensitive organisational culture further entrenches disparities. Institutional policies and informal practices often overlook women's needs, perpetuating environments marked by microaggressions, biased evaluations, limited mentorship, and tolerance of harassment (Sougou et al., 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, qualitative research highlights how male-dominated norms marginalise women in decision-making, networking, and resource allocation, while gender-blind policies deepen inequalities (Liani et al., 2021, as referenced in broader reviews). Recent analyses in South Africa and Eastern/Southern Africa reveal that even where gender policies exist, implementation remains weak, with only about 27% of African universities effectively monitoring and enforcing them, allowing patriarchal cultures to persist (Kigotho, 2025; UN Women, 2025). These barriers intersect with race and class, disproportionately affecting Black and working-class women, who navigate compounded exclusions in leadership pipelines and scholarly recognition (Mwaura & Balliah, 2024; Kiprop, 2025).

Activist Responses: In response to these entrenched barriers, feminist activists have mobilised institutional and intellectual strategies to foster change. The establishment of gender equity offices in various South African universities represents a key activist achievement. These offices, such as the Gender Equity Office at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), serve as autonomous hubs for addressing gender-based harm, tracking complaints related to harassment and violence, analysing trends, and advocating for

policy improvements. Nigerian universities must also establish Gender Equity Offices. They promote awareness campaigns, support services for survivors, and equity initiatives that extend to staff and students, though access often favours students over academics. Broader efforts include the Gender Practitioners' Community of Practice, which emerged from dialogues among equity offices to share strategies for transformation (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024 report on gender transformation at tertiary institutions). Organisations like the African Gender Institute (AGI) have historically played a vital role in documenting activism, resourcing feminist scholarship, and building intellectual spaces for change. While recent data on AGI's activities is limited (with some indications of reduced visibility post-2020), its legacy includes producing research on gender in education, supporting feminist networks, and critiquing institutional cultures (Mama, 2011b; ongoing feminist scholarship platforms like Feminist Africa). Contemporary activism also draws from movements that push for gender-responsive policies, including anti-harassment protocols and inclusive curricula. These responses underscore activism's dual focus: institutional reform and sustained advocacy to combat patriarchal norms.

The Role of Feminist Thought: Contemporary feminist thought in African academia seeks to transcend Western paradigms by integrating experiences of women of colour and women from the Global South through decolonial lenses. Scholars draw on María Lugones' concept of the "coloniality of gender" (Lugones, 2013), which posits that modern gender hierarchies were forged through colonial processes, differentially applying gender norms to racialised bodies, often rendering colonised women "non-gendered" or subhuman in colonial logic (Lugones, as discussed in decolonial feminist scholarship, e.g., Adamson, 2023; Rodrigues, 2021). This framework critiques hegemonic narratives that obscure marginalised realities, calling for rereadings of capitalist coloniality that centre intersectional oppressions. In African contexts, this influence manifests in efforts to challenge interlocking patterns of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism through collective action (Prah & Maggott, 2020). Decolonial feminist rereadings emphasise border thinking, resistance to imposed binaries, and reclamation of indigenous epistemologies, aligning with African feminism's focus on ubuntu and communal knowledge (Mookerjee, 2024). Lugones' work inspires critiques of how colonial gender constructs persist in academia, marginalising African women's knowledge and reinforcing exclusionary practices. By fostering nuanced understandings of patriarchy as historically contingent and relational, decolonial thought advocates targeted interventions, decolonising curricula, amplifying subaltern voices, and building solidarity across borders, to dismantle systemic oppression (Benya & Frehiwot, 2024; Kiprop, 2024). These contemporary issues reflect ongoing tensions: persistent institutional barriers clash with activist gains and evolving feminist thought, yet hold potential for sustained transformation toward equitable, inclusive academic spaces.

Future Directions

Ongoing protests and activism from the late 1990s to the present indicate a growing recognition of the importance of feminist channels in academia. These movements aim to maintain the relevance of feminist discourse in addressing sexism and advancing gender equity in higher education institutions (Kwachou, 2023). As of 2025–2026, student-led actions continue to spotlight gender-based violence (GBV) and exclusion on campuses, signalling sustained momentum for change.

Policy recommendations emerging from scholarly analyses emphasise multi-level interventions. Institutions, according to a recommendation of the Commission for Gender

Equality (2024), should strengthen gender-responsive policies, including mandatory GBV prevention training, survivor support mechanisms, and monitoring of equity offices. Broader continental efforts advocate accelerating gender transformation through data-driven approaches, such as those promoted by the African Research Universities Alliance and UNESCO's 2025 GEM Report, which calls for more women in leadership to catalyse inclusive learning environments. For example, gender inequities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) persist globally, and Diab et al. (2025) provide critical insights and recommendations to promote gender equity in STEM across the Global South and beyond. Recommendations include amending laws for gender equity in higher education, enforcing inclusive STEM policies, and mobilising resources for gender-equal research grants in sub-Saharan Africa. Continental frameworks like the African Union Agenda 2063 and CESA 2026–2035 position women educators as key innovators, urging recognition of female leadership to drive educational transformation (ADEA, 2026).

Prospects for gender equity and societal transformation remain promising yet contingent on sustained activism. By fostering environments where women assert voices in decision-making, feminist channels can evolve, potentially leading to significant societal shifts, redefining higher education as equitable, decolonised spaces that challenge patriarchal norms and contribute to broader liberation. Future directions hinge on bridging activist energy with policy enforcement, ensuring feminist critiques translate into structural change across African academia and beyond.

Conclusion

This article has examined feminist critiques of patriarchal knowledge production in African academia, tracing how colonial legacies and intersecting oppressions, gender, race, and class continue to marginalise women's voices and indigenous epistemologies. From historical entrenchment of Eurocentric systems to contemporary institutional barriers, the analysis reveals knowledge production as a site of power that reproduces exclusion, while feminist interventions offer pathways for resistance and equity. Core arguments center on key concepts: knowledge production as politicised and exclusionary; intersectionality as essential for addressing compounded oppressions; feminist epistemology as a tool for centering women's experiences; capitalist patriarchy as interlocking systems sustaining subordination; and African feminism as contextually grounded frameworks reclaiming agency and decolonizing thought. Critiques expose how patriarchal paradigms hinder change, advocating women-centred research practices and epistemic justice over reliance on the master's tools. Empirical cases, from female deans' challenges and leadership disparities to Fees Must Fall's transformative impulses, underscore persistent realities while highlighting activism's role in pushing reform.

The transformative potential of feminist critiques lies in moving beyond inclusion toward fundamental reimagining: decentering Eurocentric methodologies, integrating indigenous forms of knowledge through horizontal exchanges, dismantling capitalist-patriarchal structures, and building inclusive spaces that valorise African women's contributions. Ongoing protests against GBV and exclusion, alongside policy pushes for gender-responsive higher education, signal evolving momentum. By sustaining feminist channels, academia can become a locus of resistance, equity, and collective flourishing. Broader implications extend to African higher education and global decolonial scholarship. Within the continent, these critiques support Agenda 2063 and CESA 2026–2035 goals, positioning gender justice as foundational to sustainable development and epistemic sovereignty. African feminism enriches decolonial dialogues, challenging universalist

paradigms and demonstrating how localised struggles inform transnational solidarity against interlocking oppressions. Feminist interventions hold promise for redefining knowledge as liberatory, fostering societies where diverse African realities shape authoritative narratives and drive equitable futures.

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