

‘BELIEVING IN OURSELVES’

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Introduction

Greetings and thank you for inviting me to this, the eighth Gender Festival, my first to attend. Thank you too for giving me the honour of addressing you on the opening of the Gender Festival.

I was asked to speak to you about African feminism—or feminisms, knowing that there are many different kinds of feminism on the African continent and world wide—and its contributions to the theory and practice of democracy and development, its analysis of democracy and development today in our sub-region and the implications of that analysis for our mobilisation and organisation. I thought hard about what I could say that could be relevant, potentially useful, given the diversity of people attending this Gender Festival. Finally, remembering one of the key, old feminist slogans worldwide—the personal is political—I thought I would begin by sharing some of my own experiences in becoming an African feminist and, more importantly, trying to work as an African feminist. For one of the distinguishing features of feminist theory and practice worldwide is that practice informs theory and vice versa, in a circular manner—the experiential is at the core, the heart of the theoretical—and the political, the theoretical is meaningless unless it impacts upon the personal, the experiential.

Where I entered the story

Although I grew up in Kenya—in both Mombasa and Nairobi—I spent my late teens and early twenties in Canada. I went to university early, at the age of sixteen, where I quickly deviated from ideas of becoming an astronaut, a marine biologist, into the study of political science, focused on international relations and, specifically, African political economy. ...—in political science, I found, finally, the tools to understand where I had come from—Kenya and Africa’s place in the world from the perspective of dependency and underdevelopment.

It was outside the university, however, that I found the additional tools to understand why I had felt, growing up, the ambivalence I did towards where I had come from—my feeling of belonging and yet not belonging. From my involvement with the Kenyan left—student and underground activists—then in exile in Canada, I found

tools to understand class within Kenya, Africa. And, in my involvement with first, the Canadian women's movement and later, the then explosive contestation of that movement by indigenous women and 'women of colour,' I found tools to understand how gender, race, sexuality interplay differently but everywhere in the world. Finally, of course, it was on my return home to Kenya in the mid-1990s and my involvement in the constitutional reform movement coming from the emergent, autonomous human rights and women's movement, that I was able to start the long and somewhat painful process of trying to put those tools to work where it most mattered to me.

A simple illustration: I was very earnest in my 20s—I am told I am still too earnest, serious—and thus as simple a matter as what to do with my hair was the subject of far too much deliberation than it should have been. As a feminist, a leftist and a pan-Africanist, I wanted it to be natural. Actually, I wanted dreadlocks, but, until I became involved in the Kenyan political struggle, I had associated dreadlocks primarily with the Rastafarian movement. I empathised with some aspects of Rastafarianism, of course—its anti-'Babylon' position I saw as anti-capitalist imperialism, its 'back to Africa' position, I saw as both anti-racist and pan-Africanist. But, from a feminist perspective, I was concerned about women in Rastafarianism—I did not believe in walking one step behind any 'king man.' And as an anti-racist, I was concerned about cultural appropriation—I was not from the old African Diaspora in the Caribbean.

Fortunately (for my hair), through being involved in the Kenyan political struggle, I found the stories I had never been taught in school. I learnt, for the first time, that Gikuyu women had played many roles in the Mau Mau—they had, of course, helped feed the fighters and maintain the critical information network between the fighters in the forest, those on the rural 'reserves' and those in other anti-colonial formations in the urban areas. But they had also fought alongside the men. The day I learnt about Field Marshall Muthoni, a Mau Mau General who had necessarily defied the Gikuyu tradition of shaving the head, is the day that I knew I could grow my dreadlocks.

Those stories showed me, beyond any doubt, that the tools I had found while away, were tools also evolved in my own context—the difference being that their evolution had not necessarily been documented or theorised. I learnt about Mary Wanjiru who, frustrated with the men's apparent inability to protest the arrest of Harry Thuku, leader of the Gikuyu Central Association (GCA), led the protest herself—and was one of the first to be felled by the colonialists' guns outside of the Norfolk Hotel. Her protest was not for naught though—Thuku was, eventually, released.

Here in Tanzania, of course, you had Bibi Titi Mohamed, a mobiliser and organiser of the Women's Wing of the Tanzania African National Union (TANU) during your own independence struggle who used culture—*lelemana* or women's dance—to recruit women and communicate independence demands. She was one of the many women nationalists active across Tanzania, who helped shape the concept of a nation rooted in Kiswahili so as to transcend ethnic differences¹. And I learnt about fighters from communities other than my own, fighters whose strategy was not always armed resistance, fighters whose struggles led right through the colonial period through to

¹ See Susan Geiger [Elieshi Lema trns]. *Wanawake wa TANU*. Dar es Salaam: TGNP & E&D Ltd. See also (2007) Mallya, Usu. 'Gender Dimensions in the History of the Struggle for National Liberation and a National Identity in Tanzania.' Dar es Salaam: TGNP.

the Moi regime. Me Katilili of the Giriama, for instance, was a prophet and spiritual leader who led her people against the British. Wambui Otieno whose divorce case brought to the fore of issues around legal dualism and the challenges of customary law impeding women's full constitutional equality rights under the regime of our founding President Jomo Kenyatta. And, not contradictorily, the mothers of political prisoners who used a customary form of protest to demand the release of their sons from detention under the Moi regime. Culture as oppression. Culture as resistance.

As I was learning those stories, passed onto me orally, sometimes (most profoundly) from those who had lived them, I was asking questions. The largest question concerned our ability as African women to organise on behalf of the men in our lives, our communities but not always on our own behalf. Mary Wanjiru and Me Katilili, for example, are revered for their contributions to the overall independence struggle and the mothers of political prisoners for their contributions to the so-called second liberation. Theirs were struggles in the public realm for the whole community, but what of their rights as women? Wambui Otieno, however, remains a largely controversial figure for fighting for her Constitutional and statutory equality rights against the customary rights of her husband's community – a seemingly personal struggle with broad social and political consequences.

I continued to read—everything I could find to help me understand how those keys unlocked the doors to my particular specificity—African creative writers, male and female, African theorists, mostly male. There was that first generation post-independence African female creative writers—Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, Mariama Ba of Senegal, Nawal el Sadaawi of Egypt, Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria, Bessie Head and Farida Karodia, both of South Africa, Aminata Sow Fall of Senegal, others less well known and, closer to home, the Kenyans Muthoni Likimani, Micere Mugo and Grace Ogot—who spoke so powerfully to the experience of being African women trying to find our way.

Here in Tanzania, of course, were Amandina Lihamba, who has also been active in broadcast regulation, the late May Matheru, Penina Mlama, who currently heads the Federation of African Women in Education (FAWE) and Martha Mvungi. And there was that second generation of post-independence African feminist theorists—many of whom had participated in the formation of the Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD), one of the oldest if not the oldest pan-African women's network in 1979 and been part of the contestation around gender and women's human rights in the context of the leftist and nationalist Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)—Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama of Nigeria, Patricia MacFadden of Swaziland, your own Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ruth Meena and Bertha Koda of Tanzania, Zenebeworke Tadesse of Ethiopia and so on.

Finally, there was that second generation of post-independence African feminist activists and practitioners—who established, both from the Diaspora as well as at home, the most important pan-African women's networks and organisations that persist today, as well as their support mechanisms—Abantu for Development, the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), the Federation of African Women in Education (FAWE), Akina Mama wa Afrika, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF).

These worked alongside the emergent autonomous women's organisations at the national level to advance sometimes—but not always!—not only the gender and women's human rights agenda, but also that agenda in the context of the struggles for accountability, human rights and increased political pluralism being waged all across the continent throughout the 1990s, albeit in somewhat different forms and with somewhat different results. Examples in Tanzania of such organisations would include the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) and the Women's Research and Documentation Project (WRDP).

Their work helped me think through and understand my own experiences—as well as situate my own experiences in the broader, longer legacy of African feminist theorising, mobilising and organising on the continent. Their work was thus critical not only for my development but sometimes my very survival—the knowledge that I am not alone but that I can stand, with utter confidence in my legitimacy, on the shoulders of all of those who have preceded me continues to be a source of both comfort and strength.

What I've learnt from my story

There are many times that the legitimacy of the African feminist project is called into question—we all know the accusations, the charges laid so often and so unjustly and in such an uninformed manner against us. And there are many times when individual and collective African feminists need the comfort and strength that comes from knowing the legacy that has been bequeathed us, knowing the solidarity that there is to be found if not all around us, then somewhere on the continent.

We are feminists. And we are Africans. As feminists, we know that calling the patriarchy to account is necessary for our being able to survive—and go beyond survival. As African feminists, we know that the patriarchy of the colonial, imperial, post-colonial and neo-imperial has interplayed and continues to interplay with our own forms of patriarchy—about which there is much contestation and debate. We know, in short, that our analysis, strategising, organising and mobilising is continually dancing on a thin line—that of seeking to challenge our own forms of patriarchy while not playing into the colonial, imperial, post-colonial and neo-imperial forms of patriarchy.

We assert therefore our right to challenge the sexist (and sometimes feudal and xenophobic) hierarchies of our own communities—but we also assert our right to belong to those communities—on our own terms, sometime forcing us to reclaim interpretation of our cultures, our religions. And we assert our right to challenge the class-based, racist and sexist hierarchies imposed by and assumed from new expressions of the colonial, imperial, post-colonial and neo-imperial—while also asserting our right to engage as citizens not subjects of the post-colonial and neo-imperial. Meaning that, yes, we are Africans but we are also global citizens—with a right to claim all that we find worthwhile in the global because Africa has always—always—been part of the global and we have always—always—been part of the engagement around the global.

What does all that mean for us today, globally and here in east Africa?

It is argued that global policymakers now understand that. For instance, during the recent Group of Eight (G8) summit, the German Presidency can be credited with the effort to ensure the agenda included gender equality. The commitments ultimately made hinged on two strategies: micro-credit for women modelled around the Grameen Bank initiated by Nobel Prize winner, Mohammed Yunus; women's reproductive and sexual health and rights in the context of national health systems support. Those commitments were prefaced, informed and legitimated by recent World Bank study on gender equality and new gender action plan: new imperative being finding that lack of gender equality can cost up to two per cent losses in growth rates. That study was itself prefaced—if not informed and legitimated—by Millennium Development Goals: Goal three being specifically on gender equality as evidenced by the indicator on levels of women's political participation; and two other indicators under other goals having to do with maternal mortality rates and gender parity with respect to primary school enrolment.

Thus, we—meaning women—are on the global 'development' agenda. The question is why are we still so discontent. I will return to the problems with the 'new' global agenda later—which include how our agenda and strategies, autonomously determined, always run the risk of cooptation. But I thought I'd begin by talking about the conclusion I recently finished writing to a book about to be published on 20 years of the women's movement in east Africa. The book had two aims:

- First, to compare normative and paradigm shifts from the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985 through the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 to the present—including how analysis of issues prioritised (or aspects thereof) as well as how strategies to address those issues (or aspects thereof) have changed over time
- Second, to look at extent the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (FLS)—and Vienna, Cairo, Beijing Platforms/Programmes for Action (PFA)s' commitments have been realised or not through eight sectoral review papers

The findings and recommendations of each sectoral review paper too detailed to share here. However, the general or overall findings and recommendations included in the conclusion are worth sharing.

Normative shifts

The Nairobi FLS was explicit about women's human rights being undermined by unequal power relations within the global political economy; Beijing PFA not. The Nairobi FLS strong on analysis and strategies directed specifically at women; the Vienna and Cairo PFAs marks entry of women's human rights approach; two years later, Beijing PFA marks entry of GAD; adoption of gender mainstreaming as a strategy at all levels; more specific about actors responsible; Beijing+5 and +10 review processes on targets, measures and indicators. While the loss of the 'bigger picture' is clearly something we must address, it is important to note that all other normative shifts came from us—they were attempts to evolve strategy so as to ensure our agenda would and could be addressed. And, to some extent, it could be said that those attempts have borne fruit.

Implementation and impact

There has been progress at normative level with respect to all sectors regionally—the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the African Union (AU)’s Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality being the most significant gains here—as well as nationally. BUT: fundamentally, women’s citizenship and equality rights are still contested, subject to Constitutional clawbacks with respect to religious law (even where clawbacks with respect to customary law removed, as has happened in Kenya and despite continuous efforts in this respect in Tanzania).

There has also been progress at institutional level regionally—examples here include the AU Commission’s adoption of a 50 per cent representation standard by/for women and the advent of the AU’s Women, Gender and Directorate (WGAD) in the office of the Chair—as well as nationally (for example, the coming into being of national gender machineries in all three east African countries). BUT: there is continued resistance to affirmative action in Kenya; there are disappointments with the impact of affirmative action in Tanzania and, especially, Uganda; all national gender machineries are weak (because of the legal frameworks backing them, their financial and human resourcing and, most importantly, their capacity for influence across and within all line Ministries and other institutions).

There has been some progress in all sectors. BUT: there are variations in progress sector-by-sector (for example, education on largely on track; there is some progress with governance, human rights and the media; there is little progress with the arts/culture, the environment; there is next to no progress with respect to sexuality; and, most importantly, there are real reversals with respect to poverty, growing income inequalities and decreased livelihood possibilities despite the recent increases in Gross Domestic Produce (GDP), reported improvements in absolute and relative poverty levels and gender budgeting initiatives throughout east Africa)

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The real problem

The critique, of course, has been that the problem lies with how we—meaning the women’s movement—articulate our analysis and strategies. To the extent that this is true, it is, of course, unsurprising given the lack of real investments in generating the empirical evidence—basic data and statistics—needed to back our arguments for change (if investments in social science research generally are a problem, investments in feminist and gender research are even more so—although there are now 30+ gender studies units in Africa, considering that there are over 1,000 public universities in Africa, this number is far from sufficient). But much as attempts at valuing the broader costs of our claims matter—..—our claims should also matter from the perspective of ethics and values—in fact, of ideology. Which they don’t.

In fact, the resistance to our analysis and strategies is not about our evidence—the latest demographic and health survey in Kenya found that one in every two Kenyan women experiences violence: a shocking 50 per cent. This is higher than any extrapolation from media or police reports or women’s organisations case loads could have predicted. Yet, this did not stop provisions on marital rape being excised from Kenya’s new sexual offences act (an excision agreed to in the interests of having the

act passed as was the case in Tanzania). And marital rape provisions remain one of the most contentious sticking points hindering passage of Uganda's long-delayed Domestic Relations Bill (DRB).

Neither is the resistance to our analysis and strategies about our moving from evidence to correct analysis and appropriate strategising—with respect to the G8's new commitments to microcredit for women, the women's movement has long ago moved from the analysis that microcredit is a useful but insufficient strategy for women's economic empowerment given that it essentially enables only re-distribution among the impoverished rather than re-distribution in a larger sense (in this sense, microcredit can only be seen as being rehabilitated in part of strategies included in what Gita Sen recently called: 'the new mantra of soft growth').

Newer attempts to move from micro- to macro-levels include the no-longer-new gender budgeting initiatives—that exist with varying degrees of success not just in the east African sub-region but all across Africa. The demands made here with respect to allocations of public expenditure also have monetary and fiscal implications—but even in (relatively) participatory poverty reduction processes, discussions on the macroeconomic framework (MEF) invariably remain closed. The assumption is that what we have to offer is insights into better targeting of public expenditure—not insights into how to run economies in manners that are more equitable, not just more stable but also focusing on fiscal and monetary policy.

And why are the MEFs closed? In part, they remain locked to us because of the MEF implications of ever more broad reaching global investment and trade rules. But, even more alarming (if amusing), is one finding of the recent global report on investment which noted that, of all the countries surveyed, only in France does a majority of citizens now believe that the market is not the best (if not only) basis for running our economies. That is, the predominance of singular thinking is now global despite the obvious failures of such singular thinking—about the inevitability of neo-liberal globalisation—in practice.

The resistance is thus fundamentally about ethics and values—ideology—manifest by the reduction of gender analysis mainstreaming to numbers and representation (about which there is also, by the way, continued resistance) but to what those numbers and that representation is meant to bring to the table .. And that resistance to our ethics and values—about our autonomy and choice in all areas of our life, including the political-economy at national, regional and global levels and, just as contentiously, our own reproduction and sexuality—is still justified on the basis of customary and religious law—despite the immense amount of work done by African (and other) feminist scholars and activists on re-interpretation of the same so as to extend their rights' protection potential. Resistance framed in supposedly customary and religious law is, in fact, growing—not just as a natural thesis-antithesis process to our own gains (without synthesis) but also in response to inequalities created by the global political-economy and its ripple effects regionally and nationally.

This is where the transformational potential of the tools that we have ourselves developed—tools for gender analysis and mainstreaming—has to be recognised as limited. It is not just that those tools are misunderstood and inappropriately applied—sometimes even by ourselves. It is that they were intended for application to policies,

programmes and projects—but the broader political-economic context, nationally, regionally and globally, within which those policies, programmes and projects are formulated continues to need to be addressed; as does the most micro-level experience of their impact—on our very bodies

Is it all bleak?

No!

I come back to the organisations mentioned above—regional and national. As well the research now coming out of the African Gender Institute/Gender and Women's Studies network (AGI/GWS); CODESRIA's gender programme; the Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) Africa, the Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa (GERA) and Gender and Trade Network in Africa (GENTA). And attempts to bring African feminist academics and activists together in the African Feminist Forum (AFF), held for the first time in Accra, Ghana last year which agreed upon an African Feminist Charter to inform our analysis as well as, importantly, how we mobilise and organise. Here in Tanzania, you have similar efforts under the coalitions and umbrellas for collective mobilising and organising, from a sound evidence-base, provided by FemAct and the TGNP which believe in transformation through feminist principles and action. And you have your own national feminist congress—this Gender Festival.

This explicit naming of who we are and how we should do what we do as African feminists is an attempt to bring the transformational potential of analysis together in strategies—in our own organisations and networks as well as with respect to the broader world. And it is this kind of initiative—which parallels this Gender Festival—which, I believe, will help us change our world. We need to believe in the power of our history and try to uncover it for the lessons that it reveals. We need to believe in the power of own experiences, personally and collectively, document those experiences, analyse them for what they tell us about how to mobilise and organise more effectively. We need to believe in the power of those that are trying to do that analysis, for and with us—seek them out and actively seek to bridge the practice/theory divide. In short, we need to believe in our own power—and seek to realise that power in the many worlds we all occupy, in the time that we have available to us.