

WOMEN

LEADING AFRICA

Conversations
with inspirational
African women

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Volume 1: Politics, the Arts and Feminist Spaces



Edited by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

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ABOUT THE AFRICAN WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT FUND (AWDF)

10 Years of Leadership and Empowerment for African Women

“Heartfelt congratulations to you, AWDF Sisters, on reaching your tenth year! You have succeeded in your goals; you have weathered the global economic crisis; you have demonstrated resilience and determination to succeed in your noble cause to promote leadership and empowerment for African women.”

H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia.

The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) is a grant-making foundation that supports local, national and regional women's organisations working towards the empowerment of African women and the promotion and realisation of their rights. The AWDF is the first pan-African women's grant-maker on the continent and since its inception has established itself as an innovative organisation at the cutting edge of social justice and women's rights philanthropy in Africa.

The vision of the AWDF is for women to live in a world where there is social justice, equality and respect for women's human rights. To this end, *our mission* is to mobilise financial, human and material resources to support African women and the work of the African women's movement to advance women's rights and gender equality in Africa. We believe that *if* women and women's organisations are empowered with skills, information, sustainable livelihoods, opportunities to fulfil their potential, plus the capacity and space to make transformatory choices, *then* we will have vibrant, healthy and inclusive communities.

Since the start of its operations in 2001, the AWDF has provided over \$19 million in grants to 800 women's organisations in 42 African countries.

FOREWORD

At the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), we believe in the agency and leadership of African women. We have seen how women's activism changes lives. This is not a new phenomenon. African women have been spearheading change on the continent from time immemorial. Generations of African women have been working, pushing, fighting and showing a commitment to, and a love for, the people of this continent. Though change is sometimes painfully slow, their efforts have borne fruit in many arenas.

We need more of such women. We need more of such leadership. We need much, much more of these women's stories to be told. So, we hope that by having access to the conversations with the women in this volume, other African women of all ages will feel encouraged to let their leadership capacities thrive.

This publication was developed from formal and informal conversations between AWDF Co-Founder Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, AWDF Director of Programmes Sarah Mukasa and other feminist colleagues. They recognised how valuable it was for the stories of African women's leadership to be heard in clear, yet informal ways. Conversations allowed women to tell their stories, highlight their inspirations and discuss their hopes and challenges *in their own words*. So, the interviews featured in this book allow for an unmediated insight into the lives and minds of some wonderful African women from the worlds of politics, arts and feminist activism.

Their stories are inspirational. You can feel the anger and dismay experienced by Margaret Dongo who fought on the front lines to free Zimbabwe, only to witness the discrimination women had to deal with after liberation. You can empathise with the inner struggle as Pregs Govender stood by her principles and values when faced with hard choices between her political loyalty and her moral convictions.

You can see and hear the vivacity and passion brought to the women's rights movement through the work and ideas of artists like Jessica Horn.

The women in this volume are amazing, but they are only a beginning. Putting together this book further highlighted how many great stories are waiting to be told and how many great conversations could, and should, be shared with African women. So, this is the first in a series of volumes we hope to produce, with future publications focusing on different sectors, generations, and geographies within the continent.

Read and enjoy this initial volume!

Theo Sowa CBE
Interim CEO, AWDF

INTRODUCTION

Soon after I started working for the AWDF in April 2008, I had the opportunity to interview internationally acclaimed author and feminist, Professor Ama Ata Aidoo at *Mbaasem* (Women's Affairs) – the writing centre she established in Accra, Ghana. I spent over two hours enthralled in the professor's company. I left feeling inspired to continue my own quest to become a 'proper' writer. I had grown up reading *Anowa*, I had been cast as the 'Slave Girl' in my sixth form class' production of *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, I had written my undergraduate dissertation on the concept of home in the writings of Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta, and I had even named the first training programme I co-established '*The Anowa Project*'. Spending one-on-one time with Ama Ata Aidoo was a dream come true.

Since 2008, I have had the opportunity to interview numerous inspirational African women across the continent. Some of these women are relatively well known internationally (Ama Ata Aidoo is a case in point), others have come to international recognition in recent times (Leymah Gbowee, for example, who was co-awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize), but the vast majority of women I have interviewed are known only to other members within their sector and more immediate communities – whether this be the artistic community or the women's movement. Yet these women have compelling stories to tell; stories that need to be brought to the attention of wider audiences, compelling thoughts on women's leadership and how they have led within their chosen field. *Women Leading Africa: Conversations with Inspirational African Women* is part of the AWDF's efforts to communicate the achievements of African women and document *our* stories for posterity. It is my hope that in a small (or big) way, this book contributes to changing the negative, disempowering images of African women and showcases African women

for who we are – powerful agents of change, making a difference in our lives, our communities and the world at large. Be inspired!

My sincere gratitude goes to H.E. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, First Lady of Ekiti State, Nigeria for conceptualising the need for this book, Michelle Wilson who is an invaluable sounding board in my writing and editing process, and all the members of the ‘Facebook Palaver Hut’ who so enthusiastically contributed questions for my interview with feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

Programme Officer, Fundraising & Communications, AWDF

THE POLITICS

On the African continent today, there has been only one democratically elected woman head of state – H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia. Women's representation in parliaments across the continent remains low, on average 19.6% in sub Saharan Africa.¹ In countries like Ghana, the number of women in parliament has been shrinking.² In a few countries such as Uganda and South Africa, party quota systems have led to an increased representation of women in parliament, 34.9% and 44.5% respectively.³ Rwanda currently leads the way with the highest representation of women parliamentarians globally at 56.3%.

Feminists have long made a case for increased participation and representation of women in politics on the basis of rights, equity and standpoint. On the African continent, the demands that African women have made around representation in the political and public sphere have been captured in Women's Manifestos penned in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania. “*The Women's Manifesto for Ghana*” demands:

*That all political parties promote affirmative action to progressively increase the number of women candidates for parliamentary elections in order that there is at least 30% representation of women by the year 2008 and 50% representation by the year 2012.*⁴

1 Women in National Parliaments 2011, viewed on 31st October 2011, <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>>

2 Mensah-Kutin, R. & Dzah, E. 2009. *Issues and Lessons Learnt in Elections 2008*, Abantu for Development, Accra.

3 Inter-parliamentary Union 2011, viewed on 1st November 2011, <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2291_A.htm> and <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2329_A.htm>

4 The Coalition on the Women's Manifesto for Ghana 2004, *The Women's Manifesto for Ghana*, The Coalition on the Women's Manifesto for Ghana, Accra.

Yet the 2008 figure was not achieved and it is clear that the 2012 figure will not be achieved without a major change in policy by the leading political parties.

Beyond making the case for substantive representation of women in politics, African feminists are asking for women politicians to pursue a feminist agenda and make a difference to the lives of women and communities. At the International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, the AWDF facilitated a provocative Great Debate on the motion "*We have wasted our time pushing for more women in decision-making positions. They are indifferent to the concerns of women.*"⁵ This debate raised several key issues including the need to develop support systems and alliances with women in political and public office, the challenges of working within an inherently patriarchal system and the need for substantive representation of women politicians if social justice for women is to be attained.⁶ According to Goetz and Hassim (2003) "*...descriptive representation may be a necessary first step to the institutional transformation that is required if 'substantive' representation is to be achieved.*"

In other words, we may have to settle for quantity rather than quality initially. However, many African feminists would argue that African women deserve more than mere numbers. The women in the following interviews show that there should be no need to sacrifice quality for quantity.

5 The Great Debate, 7th March 2009, International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, Monrovia.

6 African Women's Development Fund 2009. 'Report of Activities at the International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security', African Women's Development Fund, Accra.

HONOURABLE WINNIE BYANYIMA

Political Activism in Undemocratic Spaces



Winnie Byanyima is a Ugandan politician and diplomat. In her political life, she was elected three times to the Ugandan legislature. She currently works with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the Director of the Gender Team within the Bureau for Development Policy.

AW: What motivated you to go into politics?

WB: I was drawn to it. I grew up in a family that was involved in politics. My father was a member of Parliament in the opposition. My mother was an activist in the women's movement and also an activist in a political party. So, I grew up really aware of public roles and the importance of contributing in a public space. As I was growing up, there was a conflict in my country and I was thrown into that conflict.

AW: It must have been very inspirational for you to have a mother who was an activist. How do you think she shaped your early opinions and ideas?

WB: Fundamentally, I'm really who I am because of her, and also because of my father. My mother was a leader of women's clubs and the women from my village met at our home. She had weekly meetings with the mothers in my community and they were engaged in a lot of activities including literacy classes, because at that time the women in the community were illiterate and she was a school teacher. She was running classes to help teach reading, writing, income generation and early childhood development. I remember sitting in these groups discussing what a balanced diet is, the importance of girls' education, the importance of nutrition and clean water, the need to boil water or milk, how to look after a baby, all these things; learning how to knit, how to do beadwork. I can do about many different crafts that my mother used to teach – from basketry to weaving to knitting to embroidery, *anything!* She shaped me and gave me a love of working with women and working in the community and being empowered with others.

AW: How old were you at that time?

WB: Very young, I first became aware when I was very young. My first memories of my home life are memories of the community work my mother did.

AW: You must have been very proud of your mother. Did you have an idea of the kind of impact she was making in communities or did you think it was within your blood so it was the norm for you?

WB: It was not within my blood, but I was shaped by it right from my childhood. I took it for granted actually, because I didn't know anything else. I just knew that it was important to be a part of the community and to give back to the community. She was more privileged – like I said, she was a school teacher, but she was living in a community where there were women who had no formal education and she was working with them every day, every week. So, I knew this was the way life was lived; whatever you have, you give back to the community. I took it for granted and I didn't know at that time that I was being influenced. It's now in retrospect that I see how powerful an influence she was on me and I'm in the public space because that's what I knew.

AW: When did you make a conscious decision to further your career in politics?

WB: I didn't make a conscious decision. It happened to me because, like I said, I grew up knowing about activism in the public space, but the public space became increasingly dangerous in Uganda; we had civil wars and dictatorships. So, I found myself drawn into it because that's where my parents were active. There wasn't a particular day when I took a decision to become a politician. In a sense, I just found

myself there. In that sense, mine is a very untraditional path to politics from that of most women. But if you look at it within the context of conflict, you'll find many women drawn to politics who didn't decide to have a political career. I don't even look at it as a career. It's just the story of my life: I was born with politically active parents and grew up in a violent environment and I was also part of that. There was no day when I woke up to choose a career in politics.

AW: I can only begin to imagine what it must have been like to live in a society with conflict. What was it like for you fighting years of dictatorship?

WB: That's a long story that I cannot tell here. There are many things about it that are both bad and good. There are some horrible memories that I'll never forget and there are some very fulfilling moments. For example, if you save a life, if you help somebody pick up the pieces and continue; those moments remain with you too. It is sad because you see so many lives that are struck down; you see so many beginnings that never flower. I can't begin to tell you the story of dictatorship and conflict here. Only that it shapes you and it gives you trauma and also strength, especially if you're lucky enough to survive it.

AW: What is your take on leadership, especially as a female politician in Africa?

WB: I have the view that there is a leader in everyone. We tend to only look at leaders who are in the public space, but the truth is that there is a leader in everyone and, given the opportunity, that leadership can flower and be great. For example, there's been so much violence that I've seen women apply their leadership in civil society, in academia and even in the private sector; you see exemplary women doing great things there. But in politics, we have had a difficult time. We now have the numbers, but it's still quite a violent space and those numbers

have not really allowed more women to exercise their leadership skills. The space is very constrained. However, we have great women who have excelled as leaders in other sectors.

AW: Do you feel the men are giving you the opportunity to play an equal part in politics?

WB: Our political space has been very turbulent. We've had a turbulent country with dictatorships and wars. In the last 20 years there's been some stability, but still with a lot of conflict in other parts of the country. It's not that men don't want to give you the space, it's just that the space is very polarised; a few individuals who happen to be men – but who also have women who support them – dominate it. It's not as easy as saying men don't give women the chance; it's more complicated than that. It's really an undemocratic space. The real challenge is to democratise it, and to democratise it in a way that gives women equal opportunity. The challenge is bigger than giving women space; it's about giving all people space.

AW: What do you think the future holds for women in politics in Uganda?

WB: There was an opening that was created through conflict. We have a quota, a constitutional reservation for women in politics. At the local government level, it's a third, and as a result we now have more than 40% women in local government – one of the highest in the world. At the parliamentary level, participation is around 30% or so. That's an achievement! It can be used to strengthen women's political leadership further, but that space alone is not enough. It's also about the quality of that space. In terms of democracy, the project of building democracy is quite stalled in Uganda. Some of the gains made through the constitution are being reversed right now. The power that the Parliament had has been reducing in the last few years. You don't want women coming into a space that's tighter and tighter and

less useful in terms of advancing women's rights. So, there's a challenge that's broader than the numbers. It's the challenge of making different parts of the state more democratic.

AW: Why is there a reversal in the gains made when studies show that women politicians can make a positive impact on a society?

WB: There are so many myths surrounding the impact of women politicians, not supported by enough evidence. One myth, for example, is that having more women in politics makes governments less corrupt; that having more women in politics makes governments more democratic. All these are myths. The evidence isn't there to support these assertions. What we need to work on are different projects which are all related. One is democratising the state. In Africa it's still a big challenge – building internal democracy in state institutions, creating a healthy relationship between, for example, a parliament, a government and the judiciary, separating these powers and sharing them in a democratic way. This is not happening yet, right across Africa. Internal democracy within political parties is not there. So, even if you have 100 women in the structures of a party, unless the party decides in a democratic way, can a woman leader have a voice in shaping her party? You might not have a voice to influence what happens in the state, even if your party is in power. There is a need to build and contribute to democratisation in Africa. Making elections free and fair, giving power to parliament to check the government, to oversee how resources are spent, to make laws that advance women's rights; that space for the parliament to do its work is constrained. That must be challenged so that when women go there, they can do a good job. There is a need to work on human rights, strengthening human rights, and within that, women's rights. If civil society does not have a voice, if people are not free to express themselves, to organise themselves around the issues of their choice, then how can you be talking about numbers making a difference? Numbers can't make

a difference in a country where women cannot come before parliament and claim their right to land, or whatever their issues are. There are several interlinked projects that will help women contribute to the country. It's not just about the numbers in politics. The numbers are meaningless in an undemocratic regime.

AW: So, do you consider yourself an African feminist?

WB: Absolutely, because, first and foremost, I see myself as an African. I'm an African and I'm committed to making life better for Africans; for Africans to have dignity in this world; to have equality. That, for me, comes first and that's what I've spent a good part of my life doing in politics. It's really about ensuring that African people have respect and dignity, and live lives of quality like other people in this world. I'm a feminist who's described by the reality of Africa. My feminism is cut in the African reality. We are the most marginalised, the most downtrodden people in the world. At the same time, we have a history that makes me so proud. An ancestry, the values we still have. We have survived four centuries of slavery and one century of colonialism and we are here, still alive, and still able to fight. There are other races that have vanished from the face of the earth.

My job with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is a global job. I travel to all the continents, promoting gender equality. I studied in the UK and I'm based in New York. In North America, the Native Americans were wiped out, they are not there; the descendants of the few survivors are in reserves. We could be in reserves in our own continent but we are not. We are leaders in our continent, so I'm a proud African but I'm also aware that we are the weakest and the most downtrodden. I'm an African woman and I'm an African feminist. I'm a feminist, but I'm different from a Western feminist who has a different reality and a different agenda in some respects.

AW: When you were younger and your mother was an activist, did she have an opportunity to be an MP?

WB: My mother was an activist within the party. She held positions within the party. She had a position in the district branch and later on in the National Executive of her political party, but she didn't run for parliament.

AW: Could she have run for office?

WB: Absolutely. She could have, and many times she was asked to. She once served in local government, but she resigned and joined civil society when the local government became corrupt. She was a very important player in her political party. She passed away last November and she was buried with the full honours of her political party.

AW: What did she make of your career to date?

WB: Let me tell you something painful to me. When she died, last November, I went home and went straight to her bedroom and looked at her bedside. I picked up the books by her bedside. She was not a book person. She didn't read a lot but she was very religious. I found some devotional books, meditations by very famous thinkers from the Catholic Church. Then, there was a book that I'd edited about women's leadership and it was there. In the book, I'd collected and edited the stories of more than 20 Ugandan women of various generations and their contributions to public life. Interviews like the ones in this book. I'd also contributed a chapter in that book. In the chapter, I talked about my life and the important role my mother played in shaping me. I don't even remember where she got the book. I may

have given her a copy or maybe she helped herself to one from my bookshelf, but it was by her bedside and that told me just how proud she was of me. I know she was – she would not tell me directly but she told other people.

**AW: You're a mother now, what kind of future
do you see your son growing up in?**

WB: I'm afraid I might destroy this boy. He's my only child and I pump him so much with what I believe in that I fear that, in his teens, he might reject the force with which I bring my ideas to him. But so far, he's a great boy. He's nine and the night before I left to go on mission two days ago, he made origami. He made a little box and he put in many little cranes made from white paper. Then, he made one crane from orange paper and put all the cranes in the little box. He had written a message telling me to look there. I looked there and I saw a little square box filled with little cranes. Then he said, "*That orange one, that's you because you stand out. You are confident and you stand out.*" I said to him, "*Why did you do that?*" He answered, "*I just wanted to tell you that I'm proud of you, we are so alike.*" I said, "*Really? Do you stand out?*" He said, "*I do, I stand out, I'm different and I'm confident.*" I even asked him, "*Why do you think you're different? Why do you think you stand out?*" He said, "*Mum, it's obvious and everybody tells me so.*" He's a black boy, one of two in his class, and he has that confidence. I hope I'm giving him feminist values. I keep trying to challenge myself to really live my beliefs because kids are smart, they learn from example, not just words. His dad is a very positive figure too, but he doesn't live with us. He's less influenced by him as he lives in Uganda, but I try to get them to engage as much as possible. I hope I'm influencing him in important ways. I hope I'm giving him the things I cherish most, like justice, compassion, honesty, working hard, giving back and sharing with the community. That's what I want to give him.

AW: I've read about your phenomenal history and you are just an inspiration. There are millions of girls who are going to read about you in the future. What would you like them to take away from your example? What would you like to say to young girls?

WB: If I'm talking to African girls, I'd like to tell them to love their community, to care. By that I mean to care for those who lack the opportunity to fulfil their real potential. To have that care, that connection with the community and with those in the community who don't have the same opportunities in life. Too many young people, and even us in our generation, we are out for ourselves and we see leadership as fulfilling ourselves, and not leadership to build the community. That, for me, is the most important thing. That's what has driven me – the justice that our communities deserve.

AW: What is the future of Uganda like?

WB: In the short term, it's not very optimistic. We have got a leadership that is coming from a struggle led by intellectuals against dictatorship, against militarism, but that leadership has now turned into a dictatorship too. So you've got people who are well educated, who have a history of being a part of the liberation struggle, but who have abandoned the cause. Returning Uganda to a democratic path now is a serious challenge. The other challenge is our economy, because we have got an economy that is on a path of real growth, but which does not produce enough jobs for the people. Developing the economy so that it delivers jobs for young people; investing in agriculture, in tourism; investing in those areas that would get young kids out of school, off the street and into jobs – all of this is not happening. So, in the short term, we have some serious challenges of leadership. But when I look in the far future, I also see that Uganda is poised to

break out of its status as a low-income country. Some of the fundamentals were put there when the group in power was still committed, so in many ways, we are better off than many other African countries because we have certain fundamentals right – in economic planning, in building the capabilities of our people through education and training, and in establishing constitutional order, although there are reversals here and there. We have built some strong institutions which are currently under stress. There is a fairly solid political, legal and economic foundation to build on.

In the long term, I'm optimistic; in the short term, I'm not.

AW: What do you think it will take to harness that change?

WB: We must work together and relieve Uganda from the stranglehold of an emerging dictatorship. We have to struggle to have good elections, clean and fair elections that would renew leadership. This would create an opening that might help us put the country back onto a democratic path and refocus on economic development. We need to work together to reform the electoral system so that it can deliver a truly democratic outcome. And women have a very important role to play there, in reforming the electoral system so that the next election can generate a truly democratic outcome.

AW: Are women willing to participate in the election process?

WB: There's a lot of confusion amongst our people. The opposition leaders are failing to work together to reform the electoral system. The government is reluctant to embrace reforms. It's a challenge of the entire leadership, and women have an important role because they are organised in civil society. They can push the parties to work together on electoral reforms. Civil society is concerned with women's participation in the elections, but if the election is flawed what use

is it for them to participate in the elections? So they should put the attention on the parties and the reforms so that the outcome is fair.

AW: Should there be a move to make politics more female-friendly? Is the patriarchal system part of the problem, alongside the dictatorship?

WB: I think those are stereotypes. I think the women in the villages are fighting all the time. They are not afraid of a good struggle, or a good fight. They will engage, but I think they are structurally excluded from political processes, and if you remove those structural barriers they can engage. Women in civil society are not soft cookies. They are tough but they are not focusing on the right place. They don't understand the political process and the political imperatives. They are looking at how we can get more women candidates. It's a good question, but it is not the main problem at the moment. The main problem is, how do we unlock the question of violent and undemocratic elections? How do we resolve that? So, the question should be, how do we get women to push for dialogue with the political parties to reform the electoral system, so that we can then push for more women in politics? But you find that they are saying, "*Women, come and tell us why you are not standing for election? Why are you not standing as a candidate?*" They are not asking the right questions at the right time, because they are activists in civil society looking at a political process from the outside. They are unable to open the door that they need to open. They are working from the margins. That's the problem. It's not because they are afraid. Generally women in civil society despise the political process and I respect their reasons too. It is seen as a filthy process. However, women everywhere are dealing with filthy situations. It's not nice in the home – they are battered there, you can't call that a safe space in millions of homes. If women are taking battering in the home, they can surely hold their own in the rough and tumble of politics. They can take it, but the obstacles there need to be cleared first.

AW: What advice do you have for women seeking political office?

WB: My first advice is that, if you don't have a strong passion and you don't care very much for the community and making sure the weak are served, don't get in – it's not for you. I think the political space is for people who want to work for the good of others. Look into your heart and see if you have a passion for people and making their lives better. If you find that you do, then join politics. When you come into politics, put away the stereotypes and myths. Go there as a person who wants to serve men, women and young people. Give your best, your very best. Use what you have as a woman. Don't leave anything out, and don't play the game by the rules that you find. Question all the rules and make them work for you as a woman.

HONOURABLE MARGARET DONGO

Fighting Colonisers and Post-Colonisers



Margaret Dongo was a freedom fighter during Zimbabwe's nationalist struggle for independence. She is a founding member of the Zimbabwe War Veterans Association. Between 1990 and 2000, she served as a member of Parliament, initially as a representative of Zanu-PF, and from 1995, as an independent candidate. Margaret Dongo currently is President of the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats (ZUD).

NS: What was your motivation for picking up a gun at the age of 15?

MD: People talk about democracy – I think democracy has always existed in our traditional societies. My parents were politicians. My father was a founding member of the African National Council (ANC) led by Ndabanin'i Sithole and my mother supported the opposition, United African National Council (UANC), headed by Bishop Abel Muzorewa (who later became the first Prime Minister during the transition period). Each time Dad had a meeting, police in khaki shorts would come and drag him and his colleagues out. I would have to wake up very early and before I could go to school, I had to take food to my dad in prison. I said to him once, *"Why do you get arrested every day and I have to bring you food. I'm tired."* I was seven years old at the time and this was my daily chore.

I was very stubborn when I was young. Political meetings were held in our lounge and I would open the door to my bedroom and listen. I would hear them say things like, *"Can you believe we are not allowed to drink beer or walk on the pavement?"* I thought to myself, *"What does this mean?"* But when I grew up, I could see it for myself. Africans had different schools, different swimming pools...

Mum was a teacher at a missionary school. When she got married, she had to abandon her career, as was the custom. So she became a full-time housewife. My mum was very hard-working and engaged in many income-generating projects. In those days, people would

often plant crops in the open spaces in town. You would have to go as early as 4 a.m. because, by 7 a.m., the Municipal Police would start to patrol. I used to accompany my mum. One day, she was in her ninth month of pregnancy and she wanted to go and finish her field. It was becoming bright and I kept saying to her, *“Let’s go. It’s almost 7. The Municipal Police will be here soon,”* but she kept working. We saw the Municipal Police coming so we started running. She fell and ended up delivering the following day. That incident really upset me. I thought, *“I can’t keep watching my mum go through this.”*

In boarding school, a friend told me about the freedom fighters. She was thinking of leaving to fight for the country because the auntie she lived with was giving her problems. I told her that if I were to go and join the freedom fighters, it would be because I wanted to liberate my parents. So I said to Betty, *“How are we going to do it? How are we going to walk for over 300 kilometres to the base of the freedom fighters?”*

NS: How did your friend find out about the freedom fighters?

MD: At the time, freedom fighters would come to the schools, talk to students and inspire them to join. By evening time, half the students would disappear to join the freedom fighters. For this reason, our school was guarded by police. So my friend and I studied the schedule of the police, we knew they started at midnight. There were five of us who had been recruited, we got up at 3 a.m. one morning, and we walked. We did not know where we were going. We had heard that if you took this particular road, it would get you to Mozambique.

On the road we came across the police and they said, *“What are you doing here?”* We said that we had no school fees, so were sent away from school and had come to look for work. I do not even know how we invented that story, but it worked and the police let us go. We would walk during the night and sleep during the day to avoid being caught. After two days, we got to this small hut where we saw an old

lady. She started crying when she saw us. *“Where are you going? People died yesterday.”* She hid us in the hut and locked the door. When she left, I felt my hair stand up and I said, *“We are going to die, we need to leave here.”* So we pushed each other out of the small window in the hut. As we were walking through the forest, we heard these strange sounds but we were so tired that we just fell asleep.

We eventually got to the border with Mozambique and found FRELIMO⁷ soldiers. We told them, *“We have come to join the freedom fighters and fight for Zimbabwe.”* They said we would have to be examined because sometimes the enemy would fit chubs (a poisonous plant) into the vaginas of girls so that, if the girls slept with the soldiers, the soldiers would die. They said to us *“How did you get here? Yesterday there was fighting and you survived?”* Apparently, the strange sounds we had heard in the forest had been people fighting.

They took us to the barracks and interrogated us. It was then that we began to see the horrors. Young boys and girls who had left our school were now in refugee camps. I saw one of the captains of my former school. He was in rags and said to me, *“Margaret, why did you come?”* I replied, *“You didn’t write and tell us not to... We wouldn’t have come.”*

There was hardly any food in the camps. Dinner was cowpeas, which had to be boiled for two days before it became edible. After two to three days, a car would come to pick up new recruits from the camp. We were taken to another camp where we saw more school children. They said, *“Margaret, why did you come? Don’t tell anyone you know me.”* The soldiers were always suspicious if you knew anyone else in the camps. Again we were taken for interrogation. The rules were that you abandon your name when you get there. I decided to name myself *Tichaona Munhamo* which means ‘we shall see what happens’.

7 FRELIMO is the Mozambique Liberation Front (acronym from the Portuguese name Frente de Libertação Moçambique)

At the camps there were barracks for girls and guys. Our beds were made of grass. There were insects in the grass and some people were missing fingers because the insects had bitten them. Five people had to share one blanket. We went to the river for a bath and some of the older children took our clothing and threw us their tattered rags. We had no soap to bathe with. There was this tree – you would pound the roots until they became fluffy and use that to bathe. At 3 a.m., you are woken up for exercise and you sing “*Toi, toi, toi*”. By the time you come back from exercise your voice is hoarse. When we went to exercise, we would run in the forest and we had to stick with the group, because if you didn’t stay with the group you would become food for the animals.

When I went to the training camp they said, “*This young girl, how can she do the training?*” I said, “*How can you say this? Did you walk for me?*” I underwent military training for six months. I was able to do this because of the time I spent in a rural school where I had to walk for three kilometres to fetch water. I had to toughen up there because I was working as a domestic for my mother’s sister who was a teacher.

NS: How were women and girls treated in the military camps?

MD: When we were in the struggle there was no discrimination. There were no rubber bullets for women. The training was the same and you could not train women differently. If anything, it was even more difficult for women, as there was no rule of law – there was only jungle law. It is only after the struggle that we began to see differences between how women and men are treated. That is my motivation for fighting for gender equality.

Now it’s a question of what the government can give you. Now we have to go to Beijing and SADC.⁸ In the struggles we were all equal. Right after independence all those discriminatory laws should have been repealed. If the liberation struggle did not have women involved, we would still be fighting.

| 8 SADC stands for the Southern African Development Community

The whites always targeted women in the battles. They wanted to capture them. They did not understand how women could fight. Now we are in a liberated country where we are still begging.

I am talking from a former freedom fighter's perspective. I feel the struggle did not end. What we gained was political power. We didn't manage to get that power shared with women, we didn't get economic power. We need a second struggle, which the feminists need to take up. We need the three C's – courage, commitment and confidence – otherwise, we will keep asking for protocols and treaties which are not implemented.

This is not just about Zimbabwe. In all countries, women are exploited. When you look at structures, you find that it is the men who are in senior positions. Women are displayed like flowers in places like the reception. Go to hell! What is that? Let it be a choice. When you are fully liberated, you are happy to pursue your work.

When I came back home, I decided to go back to social work. I was Secretary for Women's Affairs and was studying for a diploma. At the time, Mugabe's wife Sally was one of my mentors. She groomed me to be a politician. She told me, *"I want you to run for office."* I said, *"How can you expect me to run for office when I am so young?"* She said, *"You can, you have talent."*

I had started an organisation for women war veterans because they were destitute, their homes had been destroyed. But men destroyed this organisation. I changed its name to War Veterans but that was another struggle. They said, *"She has brought them together to fight us."* I enjoyed the harassment. I grew up in that context. That was when I ran for office and the veterans campaigned for me. I was elected at the district level. Three weeks later, I was elected at the provincial level. Three weeks later, I was elected into Congress and then I was elected as a Central Committee member. This shocked a lot of people. They said I was supposed to have been endorsed by the whole body. The first lady called me and warned me, she said, *"Can you prepare for that fight? If so I will support you."* So I went to the

meeting and they asked if someone could endorse me. The provincial chairman said, *“No, we can’t endorse her. She is young, she has contested with older businessmen which means she has no respect.”* Other men spoke up and said they would not endorse me. All of this time, I had my hand up, wanting to speak but I wasn’t being called to speak. The First Lady sent me a note, *“Keep your hand up and embarrass them.”*

All the speakers spoke against me. I said, *“Your Excellency, I am glad you have given me the opportunity to speak. Yes, I am young, but let me ask you: when I decided to become a fighter, none of you recruited me? You were all in London, which is why you are here now.”* They started applauding. One lady from Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) stood up and said, *“My sister, you are right. I was in solitary confinement for 11 years. My children have mental health problems.”* The first lady called me at night and said *“Margaret, I am proud of you. I wish Zimbabwe had ten women like you.”*

VARBAH GAYFLOR

A Call to Serve



Varbah Gayflor entered Liberian politics in 2003 when she was appointed as a representative of women during the transitional government headed by Charles Gyude Bryant. In 2006 she was appointed Minister for Gender and Development by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia. Varbah credits the African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) as the catalyst for her passion for women's rights work.

NS: How did you get involved in politics?

VG: I got involved upon my appointment as Minister for Gender and Development.

NS: And what was your reaction when you were appointed?

VG: My first reaction was “No”. I knew that we had a very bad pay system with very low salaries and there was a history of massive corruption amongst government officials. I had just come from graduate school. I was not even here when I got appointed. *(She then points to a framed picture of two young men on her desk.)* These are my sons; I am a single parent and I needed to support my sons, so I said “No”. I was not going to take up a job that would not give me enough time to take care of my kids. Furthermore, I didn’t want to steal to take care of them.

I had a Masters in Gender and Development and my plan was to find a job at the United Nations or some other international organisation, but then some of the women in the women’s movement came to speak to me. I belong to the women’s movement. In fact, I am a trainee of Akina Mama. I was first exposed to their training in 1999 and I think that is where I got that fire in me... something snapped in me and I just started seeing the injustices in my country and I wanted things to be different. Still, I said “No”.

I had never been a director, I had never been an assistant minister, nothing, and they just wanted to put me here. So I said I cannot do the job, because usually you will be a director, and then an assistant minister, before becoming a minister. Then some of the women said, *“Come, when you don’t know what to do, we will advise you.”* I went straight from being an ordinary member of staff to a minister. I felt like a kid who grows up in the village, afraid to go out at night because of the evil spirits and who only ventures out after being reassured by her grandma who says, *“Go, I am watching out for you,”* and because she trusts that she is watching, she goes out without fear. So, because I knew the women’s movement was there, I dared to venture into the unknown and it has been five years now.

NS: What will you say to other women who feel they do not want to enter politics because of the perception that politics is corrupt and they are going to be compromised?

VG: For me, I think my religious foundation is one of my strengths. I am a Christian. I was brought up as one by my mother even though I lost her at the age of eight. I pray and believe God will help me. So I have held on to that belief and my conscience has also been my guide. I have always tried to pursue what is right with God as my guide. Sometimes there are very difficult issues I am confronted with. Sometimes I am falsely accused of doing things, especially among women, and sometimes it is quite deflating. I have always consoled myself in the belief that the truth will prevail in the end. I have been able to overcome because I have a clear conscience and I do not take things personally. A classic example was during the campaign when I had to support women candidates from all political parties. There were one or two women candidates who really attacked me in so many areas of my work. Had I been petty, I would have personalised it but I rose above that because they were female candidates. I went to their rallies and, whatever little support I was able to muster, I gave to

them. Some people considered that strange. For me, as long as I serve in this office, that is what I am here to do. It is not about my personal difference with you – it is about performing my duty.

I think, when you get there, just remember that you are there against the odds. There are very few people who are elected or placed in this position. Let your presence count. And when you leave, leave some footprints so that others will come and see that you have been there and made an impact.

When I took over, gender was not a household word in this country. Women didn't know they had this ministry and that it had been in existence for two to three years. Now, the women stand out and beat their chests knowing that they have a ministry. A testimony to this is the female president that we have. For the first time in the history of this country, women came out as voters and as candidates. This led to the election of the president we have today. My ministry was recognised as the ministry that made the election successful as far as the participation of women was concerned. Old ladies were coming here and telling me, *“Minister, I only need to move from point A to point B. Pay my way and I will walk for 15 hours to make sure that the women vote for a female candidate.”* They will come to me and say, *“Oh Madam, we are on our feet, and we just wanted you to know that we are running the campaign.”* So I will just give them something small to go and buy water to drink. We were always there to encourage them. We worked with them and did everything to have what we have today.

NS: What is the percentage of women in politics in Liberia?

VG: In the legislature, we are now about 14% and, in the other areas of governance, we are about 33%. We might not all be top ministers, but we have deputies, assistant ministers and women commissioners. They are all competent women, because the president has tried to support women's participation by selecting women who have the requisite skills to perform.

NS: All over Africa, Liberia is seen as example for having the first democratically elected female head of state. Do you think this has set a precedent and that, in future, more women will be encouraged to run for office or as presidential candidates?

VG: Yes, I think more women can be encouraged to do that, but we all need to learn the lesson. It is not something that is so easy to do from what I witnessed. From observations from my own president here, she went through the rain... there were times during the campaign when womanhood was denigrated. You would see the boys in the street with a stick (*she uses a pen to demonstrate*) and they would put red colouring on the tip of the stick. They would say, “*This is what the mansion will look like.*” They would say, “*This is going to be a hotel, a motel and so on....*” If she had paid heed to the noise, I don’t think she would have won. When she (President Johnson Sirleaf) needed support, I tell you the truth, it was women who came out and made it happen. You saw old ladies with walking sticks on the day of our rally. You saw pregnant women in the line, you saw disabled women in their wheelchairs, lactating mothers with babies on their shoulders. There were also some considerate men; conscientious men who came and made it happen. It was not easy. What I say to women who are going to be in leadership or who want to aspire for leadership is that your reputation speaks for you. You have to let people know that you are among the best. You have to have good human relations. You need to relate to people so that you can reach the menfolk and the womenfolk. You can go anywhere you want to go when you are respected as a person.

NS: I am also thinking of you as a person. You are a minister but you are also an individual, a single mother with two children. How do you manage to balance it all?

VG: Fortunately for me my kids are grown up. They are not here, but when they come home we have a lovely time. They are also my supporters. They understand when I don't call them. They don't quarrel with me, and they understand that their mum is busy.

Maybe because of the activist in me, I work, work, work and go the extra mile. So I do not take care of myself, which I think I need to start doing. The weight I have now, I never had it before. As the years go by, I think I need to exercise and take some time off now and then. I am waiting for the colloquium to pass (*this interview was conducted a day before the International Colloquium in Liberia convened by the presidents of Liberia and Finland*) so that I can put a regimen in place for myself. First it was one year, now it is five years without a break. I cannot continue like this, I have worked for five years and I have not had the time for a break or annual leave. It has just been non-stop. I have just been going, going, going and I don't think it is good. These days, I feel tired which never used to happen, so I think I need some time off. Besides that, I try to cope but it is tough, and to tell you the truth, sometimes I miss those days when I was myself. I could meander; I could go anywhere and do whatever I wanted to do. Sometimes it can be a lonely place and you wish it were different. Sometimes I miss those days when I could play.

NS: Do you personally feel supported by the women's movement?

VG: There are a couple of women's movements, but the women that appreciate us the most are the ordinary women. Some of the professional women do appreciate us, but others really come after us. Being an activist in this position is not an easy thing because you want to do something different, but some people are not happy with that. They pretend to be activists, but actually it is the access to what they get in that place that they are after. That is what I am beginning to observe.

The ordinary women, on the other hand, have been there. Last Saturday, for example, we had to clean the streets and it was amazing. Those old ladies were tying their *lappas* (piece of cloth) and cleaning the sidewalks whilst the men were walking by. It was a memorable day indeed, seeing our prized ordinary women in action. They came from the market and from their homes and, for once, I think they could feel the appreciation for all their effort. Some of them came and said, "*Let me help you.*" So for me, when I see them, I have more courage, I have more energy, because I see that I have to do something for these people. They are the ones who have been left out. They are the ones who haven't had the opportunity we have had. They can give birth to me two or three times over, but you know what they call me? "*Our mother.*" This is because they see me as a mother and their minister.

Some of the activists are focused and critical. When things go wrong, they come and talk to you. They are always there. They don't sit down and say, "*let's see how she works.*" Others take it the wrong way – they don't ever come to clarify. They magnify, carry on the information and tell their friends, "*Oh, she will soon be removed from office. Let's see what she is going to do.*" Sometimes you almost want to say, "*Yes, let me go because, the money I make here, I see others in the NGO sector who make it two or three times over and they don't go through the pressure I go through.*" They don't see what I go through. I didn't come here to steal, so what I get as my salary is all that I get.

NS: As a minister, what are you personally most proud of having achieved for women in Liberia?

VG: Personally, I am happy that women in Liberia have come to realise that they can stand face to face with their male counterparts and that I was part of the process that led to this revolution. I am personally satisfied that people will recognise that we, in this ministry, played a role for the historic event that brought in place the president of the Republic of Liberia, the first female president of an African state. I am glad that, during the time that I have served, gender and women's issues have become an integral part of the national agenda. I am glad that I was part of the process that has put Liberian women back on the map. For me, that is key.

NS: Any final words for our readers?

VG: Yes, I want women to know that they shouldn't be afraid to venture. When they get out there and are confronted by issues, they should try and find solutions and not let problems dissuade them. Sometimes problems look big but they can be quite simple. When you face challenges, look around for allies that can form a support network for you – that space can be where you can try to strategise. Whatever you do, do it with a clear conscience and let God be your guide. With that, you might not get it all, but I am sure that there will be some degree of success in whatever you do.

HONOURABLE PREGALUXMI GOVENDER

Leading with Love & Courage



Pregaluxmi Govender was an activist against South Africa's apartheid regime. In 1994, as a member of the African National Congress (ANC), she was elected into the National Assembly in South Africa's first democratic elections. In 2002, she was the only member of Parliament to register opposition to the arms deal in the Defence Budget Vote, and thereafter resigned her position. In 2009, she was appointed Deputy Chair Person of the South African Human Rights Commission. She is the author of Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination.

NS: For those who do not know you, how would you describe yourself?

(Prudence Matabele, Executive Director of Positive Women's Network in South Africa, who is walking by, overhears my question and responds.)

PM: She's a leader, a teacher, a comrade, an activist, a mother and a daughter.

PG: *(She laughs and then responds also.)* That will depend on who I am introducing myself to. If I am introducing myself to a group of women from local communities who have not heard of the word feminist, I will simply say I work in the area of women's rights. So that, by the time they get to know me and I share with them that I am a feminist, they hear the word without fear because they see what is in me.

NS: I love your book. I even gave a copy to my mum and, as you can tell from people's reactions as we sit here, many people love it⁹. The title of your book is very intriguing – 'Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination.' What does insubordination mean to you?

PG: Patriarchy depends on our subordination – subordination is how patriarchy succeeds. Insubordination, for me, is being insubordinate to the power of hate, greed and fear, to patriarchal authority and systems, whether they are economic, political or social.

I was being insubordinate, for example, when I used the power I had in Parliament to register my opposition to the arms deal in the budget vote debate or by holding public hearings in Parliament when people were scared to talk about HIV/AIDS because of the position of the president and the health minister. Being insubordinate was bringing the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS, especially women who were the poorest and other voices that were being marginalised, such as feminists, activists, gynaecologists. Bringing these voices, through public hearings on the impact of HIV/AIDS on women, into the spaces where they were being silenced, was an act of insubordination.

Or, in 1994 when we came into power... After the committee on women was set up, to argue that progressive laws that would be of benefit for women should be a national priority was insubordinate. Or, to ask the finance committee in 1994 that we must look at the budget from a gender perspective to ensure budgets do not entrench inequality between men and women. When you are laughed at, for even the thought of doing that, and you stand firm to assert that this is a valid perspective and it is possible to develop gender-sensitive budgeting, *that* is to be insubordinate.

9 This interview was carried out at the book lounge of the Association of Women in Development Forum, November 2008, Cape Town and women kept coming up to Pregs asking her to autograph her book

Insubordination is to stand against patriarchal power and assert an alternative power. This is not to humiliate those you oppose. Working with an alternative power has defined my insubordination. As somebody who feels that the word God is defined and limited by its historically patriarchal context, I don't use that word and I don't subscribe to a religion. I haven't brought up my children to believe in that. I have brought them up to believe in the power of love within themselves, in other people and in our world. This is the power of creativity, the power of joy, the power of peace.

NS: That is a very interesting concept. How did you tap into it? Where did it come from? I know from reading your book that traditionally your family was Hindu and I know you practice yoga and meditate. Is that where you get the power of love from?

PG: The word meditation sometimes makes people think of a very complex process but, for me, it is simply going beyond oppressive silences and the silence which patriarchy has used to divide us, to reclaim the silence within. In such silence, I can meet myself and hear my own voice with clarity. It is the constant daily practice of starting the day, early in the morning, before life rushes in, to make that time to look into the mirror of my own conscience and experience myself as love. Experiencing that joy and taking that into my day affect the way I relate to people. Meditation is this practice. I often forget these simple steps, and that is why I need to be reminded by other people, because I grapple with my own contradictions.

I don't think patriarchy is just outside us. It is something that is inside us – in our minds, hearts and bodies. One of my lifelong lessons is confronting the pattern of working to the point of exhaustion and illness. I have begun to see how deeply I might have internalised a lack of respect for my body. Apartheid, for example, was not just on the outside. Xenophobia in South Africa shows how deeply we have internalised racism.

Very often we are taught criticism and, while criticism has its place, there is something more powerful and that is recognition. I can criticise my shortcomings, but when I recognise the power that is within myself, which is pure love, and the moment in which I touch it, I know that we can individually and collectively achieve miracles – we can transform the world. The people who rule the world, whose values of hate, greed and fear have perpetuated wars and poverty, are just a handful of people. Those of us who want peace, justice and equality are actually the majority, so we can use our power.

Yesterday in a South African workshop I facilitated, I asked people to work in groups and they worked through four questions. The questions were:

1. “What are our priorities as South African women?”
2. “What do we feel about the attacks on women’s human rights that are happening in our country at the moment?”
3. “What can we do about it?”
4. “What are the practical steps one can take after today?”

When people started, they talked about their feelings. They talked about fear, frustration, outrage and anger... Throughout we kept reconnecting in moments of silence to the power of love. We did a huge amount of work, but at the end people felt energised. At the end, there was a strong sense of unity – of what we can achieve collectively. In the groups, I asked participants to do an exercise; they took an ordinary pen and passed it as fast as possible around the group. Then, they did the same exercise again but, before passing the pen around, I asked them to centre themselves within the power of love, peace and joy. They then had to give the pen with that power and the person receiving that pen had to receive it with that same power. There was a tangible difference.

We can rush around like crazy. We serve patriarchy by burning ourselves out and all of us do it. I am talking about myself too. What I share is from my own experience. The easy verdict about people like me is that we teach best what we most yearn for, and it's true. It's true in the sense that I do yearn for a world which is peaceful, both outside and in my own heart, in my own mind. This is the point I was making when I spoke about the pain of being written out of history, or being ostracised. You can become consumed by that pain or, instead of waiting for love to come from outside, you can allow that pain to push you to a place deep within yourself and connect to the power of love. You can also be pushed to that place by laughter when you experience that moment of sheer joy. Both pain and joy can take you to that place deep within yourself. When you work with that power, what you do is tangibly different and you can achieve a huge amount, because what you are doing is not just for the sake of doing it. It is the being in that action, being that power in the doing. You have to do the task but it is the quality which you bring to it.

NS: I am very interested in what you said because one of the things I am going to take away from this forum, and especially from conversations I have had with colleagues recently, is the whole issue of activists taking care of themselves. I think the book *What's the Point of the Revolution if We Can't Dance* also brought this up as a huge issue. It's interesting to hear what you said because one of the questions I was going to ask you earlier is, "*How do you take care of yourself?*"

PG: Yoga, meditation, writing, dancing, swimming and delighting in the company of family and friends help. I am becoming better and better at taking care of myself, but old habits are hard to break – like thinking I need to respond to every crisis. There are too many crises

every day and there are hundreds and thousands of traumatic events. This is one of the lessons I have had to learn in my life.

I think I have been very fortunate, because I have people who remind me of this. My three children remind me, because I have to be present for them and, because I have to be present for them, I can't be sitting in pain. For example, in chairing hearings on the violence that women experience in their lives, I can't sit in that pain because I am of no use to those women and myself if I become devastated.

It's about the distinction between love as a power and love as a sentiment... so I continue to learn. That is why my book has the image of the spiral – it is not a linear process. Growth, my evolution as a human being, is not a linear process. No one is linear. We are spiral. I connect deeply to the power of love inside me and I take it out into the world and sometimes, when I engage with the terrible things that exist, I can feel devastated and I need to return within myself to be able to resuscitate, to be able to feel that power again, so that I can go back out. The struggle against patriarchy is a long one. The thing about the spiral is that it reminds me that I have been through this struggle before. It might have been a different form, a different place, but it's the same game and I've come out fine. It gives me the confidence that, the next time, it will be just another layer I'll be peeling off.

HONOURABLE CATHERINE MABOBORI

Mobilising Women for Peace & Politics



Catherine Mabobori is a former journalist who led a network of Burundian women's organisations known as Collectif des Associations et ONGs Féminines du Burundi (CAFOB), between 1995 and 2001. CAFOB promotes the role of Burundian women in peace-building, national reconciliation and development. Under her leadership, CAFOB mobilised to participate in Burundi's peace talks which began in 1998. The group is credited with engendering the peace agreement signed in August 2000. In 2005, Catherine Mabobori was elected as a member of Parliament in Burundi.

AW: I'm interested in the new penal laws you've introduced that benefit women. Can you give me an overview of these laws?

CM: The current penal code that we are working on dates back to 1981. At that time, we didn't have as much violence as we do now. Our legislation ignored gender-based and domestic violence. This new penal code is a good opportunity to include repression of violence against women. We had been lobbying before to have a specific law on that, but we didn't succeed. When the time came to revise the penal code, we said let us include these repressive measures and, maybe later, continue to lobby for a specific law which not only addresses violence against women but also aspects of prevention and aspects of psychological healing for victims of violence. So we've taken these steps now, but we still continue to lobby for a specific law on gender-based violence.

AW: How many years has it taken to lobby the government in order to reach this step?

CM: We have been working with human rights organisations because they were also witnessing the same increase in violence against women, especially due to the conflict. Domestic violence was also increasing. We have been encouraging women victims of violence

to speak out on gender-based violence, so that the community can become aware of the need to have a revised penal code. For about five years, we have been raising awareness among community opinion leaders, women and other human rights defenders so that we can lobby for the revision of the penal code. Together, women parliamentarians, women's organisations and the other human rights defenders have managed to convince the government that it is time to revise the penal code.

AW: What were your biggest obstacles to overcome?

CM: There are still some areas to negotiate to attain understanding. As women, we have been lobbying against gender-based violence while others have been lobbying for other things. For example, there's the big debate on whether we should criminalise homosexuality or not. Consequently, this issue is handicapping the law. Hence, we have to wait until there is a consensus on it. Despite this, we are ready to sensitise the whole population on the content of the new penal code. We did a lot of work to get there. We've been lobbying so hard, trying to contact people individually, including all the voters in the National Assembly, giving examples of how big an issue gender-based violence is and how it has become a problem for society. We have encouraged women victims of violence to speak out. We have put in place some spaces where women come to talk about their experiences and we have been collecting all the stories to show that it's time to fight against this by making good, clear legislation.

AW: How many women are there in the National Assembly and how many in the Senate?

CM: Our constitution and our electoral code say that we have to have at least 30%. In Parliament, we have 31%, in the Senate we have 34% and in Government we have 35% because the law is clear on that¹⁰.

| 10 These statistics were as of March 2009

After the election, we didn't even have up to 30% of parliamentarians who were women – we had only 23%. But because the law says we must have at least 30%, there was co-opting of some more women from those who campaigned. This measure was justified by a provision in the constitution which allows co-opting. We lobbied for that because we knew that if we didn't put it in the law, it would be difficult. That's why even for the penal code we're saying, "*Let's write it.*" Let it be clear in the law so that, if it doesn't work, at least we have something to use to lobby against or denounce what is not working.

AW: Did your fellow women politicians support your motion for change or did you find that some women did not feel it necessary?

CM: The biggest challenge is convincing other women that gender-based violence is a big issue – that it is an issue that concerns not just the victim, but all women. If a woman suffers and you don't prevent her from suffering or cry out against it, the following day it could be you. So you don't have to say, "*I'm OK with my family, I'm OK with my husband, I don't have any problem.*" You never know when problems will arise. If the society tolerates this, it means it can happen anywhere, so it was a very big issue convincing women on the need to have gender-sensitive laws, especially in the penal code. I remember a provision which stirred a big debate; it was an article in the code addressing a case where a woman is beaten by her husband. We couldn't understand each other on this, so we had to put that article to vote. Some women voted against it, which was a very big disappointment for those who had been lobbying to have that article passed. It was said that for the court to consider the case, the woman had to make a statement in person and ask the court to follow the case. However, in some cases, the woman may be in a situation where she can't even move to go to the court or she may even be dead. We were asking for permission to allow any women's organisation or person or relative who knows the case to go to the court and denounce it. Even a public institution can take the case as its own. Some women

couldn't understand that we were right in saying that anyone can go and report the case to the court or to the police.

AW: Why is it that some women politicians do not want to recognise the need to place gender issues onto their agenda?

CM: Sometimes it depends on their background. Some women have never been involved in gender issues, in feminist activities or discussions. So when we are talking about women, they don't see the necessity of addressing such issues. The second reason is that women who are in politics feel closer to their bosses in their respective political parties, and they'd like to appear as a good militant and a good male supporter, who does not only care about women but about everybody. They like to behave like men just to appear as if they're not sectarian, that they care for national issues, not particular issues.

AW: So, do you consider yourself a feminist?

CM: Yes, if I refer to the definition of feminism, I am a feminist. I care for women's issues. I'd like everybody to understand that women's rights are human rights, and at the same level as men's rights. We have the same rights and the same capabilities. I'd like everybody to understand that so that we move equally. Equality benefits the world – our nation, Africa, the whole world.

AW: What motivated you to be a feminist?

CM: Issues of injustice and of violence motivated me. I grew up observing that there were some rights denied to our mothers and grandmothers, and this revolted me. Fortunately, as I went to school, from an early stage, I could influence the behaviour of my father and grandfather.

Let me give you an example: I grew up in the family of my grandfather, the father of my mother. In my country, they produce local beer (banana beer). The smell of this beer used to attract relatives and friends to our house to see my grandmother, but she couldn't offer the beer to the visitors when my grandfather was not there because of restrictions placed on her. So when I was on vacation, I would take the beer from the pot and give it to the visitors. My grandfather would get angry, but he could not do anything to me. He would say, "*OK, these young people have been to school. They are revolutionary. They don't respect our customs,*" but had my grandmother done that, she would have had problems and this revolted me. I said then that I had to fight for women's rights because, if I didn't do it, then tomorrow it would be my turn, and then my daughter's turn, etc. I'd like for my daughter and my granddaughter not to live that way. Another example was when my grandmother went out. After six or seven o'clock in the evening, she couldn't come back home, because she would find the door locked by my grandfather. If I was there, I could open the door for her, but when I was at school, she could spend a whole night outside.

AW: Would you say that you have lived in a patriarchal system? Is your political career a way of breaking away from that and making sure it doesn't happen to other women?

CM: Yes, even though I was not prepared to go into politics. In fact, I went into politics while I was deeply involved in civil society organisations because, after the peace process in Burundi, the Parliament included civil society activists and I was one of them. However, after the transitional period, civil society didn't have any place in Parliament so I decided to campaign within a political party.

AW: What was it like the first time you made the decision to stand as a politician? Having to organise a campaign, find supporters and talk to your voters? Stepping into that process for the first time?

CM: Stepping into the process for the first time was not easy. As you know, politics is practised in a patriarchal environment, and you have to be strategic to get a space in that environment. In my case, there were some elements which helped me get a place. The public was already familiar with me, because I'd been addressing people whilst working with women's organisations. I had also worked as a journalist; hence I didn't have a problem with addressing people. Thus, campaigning was easy because people were connecting my voice to my name. They were familiar with my ideas, they were familiar with my voice and they were familiar with the issues I was defending.

AW: What was the response you had from other women when you said you were going to contest a seat?

CM: I'm not sure that all the women responded favourably because I was campaigning within a political party and not all the women belonged to that party. Plus I had opponents too. Within my political party, women appreciated me and when it came to listing us – because we were elected on a list – it happened that I was at the top of the list. Maybe the women in my political party played a role when they were listing people according to their preferences. I'm sure many women preferred me. This position helped me to win a seat, the only one my party got in my constituency. The party I belong to is one of the minority parties, the third in the country.

AW: Once you were in politics, what kind of challenges did you face as a woman politician?

CM: The first challenge was how to balance my political, familial and other responsibilities. For example, I did not give up working with women's organisations. Such a decision demands a lot of organising, it demands a lot of time and you find yourself with no time to spare.

AW: I am aware you have children. Have you always had a career in politics since you had the children?

CM: I had the first three when I was still a journalist, but I had the last two when I was already in politics.

AW: What do they think of their politician mother?

CM: They are missing me a lot, but whenever I have time, I try to make the most of it. I stay with them as much as possible when I'm at home. I try to organise them so that they can be responsible. I'd like to have more time for them, but they understand that I have to have enough time to do what I have to do because the benefits will come back to them in the end.

The older ones are quite enthusiastic about the work I'm doing, especially the second child. He is a boy who follows politics closely. He is now studying in South Africa, but whenever he hears something about Burundi and women, he calls me to encourage me.

I have tried to show my children that in life they have to be organised and work hard. Sometimes when I have work to do, I sit with them and we work together. They take their books and homework

and I take my computer. They are accustomed to seeing me working. They are hard workers also. I think they don't mind too much that I'm busy because when I have time for them I make the most of it and we go to the beach together and we go sight-seeing around the capital.

AW: And what does your husband make of it?

CM: My husband is a businessman. He's doing his own business. He doesn't care about me being in politics because he understands that each one has their own preferences and their own way of living. What is more important is that the work and responsibilities are well divided at home and we don't have problems in sharing our revenue. That is what's most important. One of the obstacles and one of the causes of women's violence is based on economic empowerment and income. He knows that I'm bringing something at the end of the month, and he doesn't care seeing me go here and there because, at the end, just like the children, he benefits.

AW: Is finding a work-life balance difficult for you and your fellow women politicians?

CM: If you are in politics or if you are doing any other job that takes up your time, you have to set your priorities. Sometimes you may have a week to do everything, but sometimes you cannot make the time. Personally, I have very little time for my friends and my relatives, so they are missing me a lot. For example, I may spend a couple of months without seeing my sisters and will only talk to them on the phone. I'm missing that side of my life – being close to my relatives and my friends, except those I meet very often in meetings and women's activities. I would also like to do some other activities such as cultural activities and practising sports. As a politician, there are some activities you'd like to do but you don't have time for them, so you have to pick your priorities.

AW: What has the experience of politics been like for you in your country?

CM: Politics have not been very easy because we are coming out of a conflict situation. We have been at war since 1993. We have been struggling together with men and other politicians. Civil society has also been involved in restoring peace to our country. We played a role during the peace process. Now, we are working towards re-integrating and managing the rebel movements. There have been a lot of problems related to the situation of conflict and its consequences. At the beginning, it was not easy for women to find a space to talk about the issues of peace and violence against women. However, we have been able to raise the issues of internally displaced women and refugees, the issues of land disputes and disarmament.

There are a lot of problems at the same time. Sometimes you don't even know what to begin with or end with. There are issues regarding HIV and AIDS, there are property-related issues, just so many problems. One other concern is the frequency of unpredictable events in politics. When you are in politics, you must always be ready to deal with urgent situations. You must be ready to react when there are bombings, mass killings or when a car has been attacked. Since I am the spokesperson of the party, I have to follow all these events, so if a journalist surprises me, I'm able to say something.

AW: So do you feel you're making an impact?

CM: Yes, I think so.

AW: Personally, how close do you feel you are to peace?

CM: I think we are close to peace because we have had many rebel movements in the past, but the last rebel movement recently joined

the peace table. They were based outside the country and now they are in the country. They have come back and I think it would be easier to negotiate when everybody is in the country. We are preparing for elections in 2010 and we hope that all the main groups will participate, the last rebel group included.

AW: 2010 is only a year away. Do you think Burundi is ready for a fair and democratic election?

CM: This question is not easy to answer because there are tensions between political parties, and even within each political party, these tensions are rising, so we are afraid that maybe we will not have fair elections. We see parties organising militias, so we are afraid that they may be getting ready to influence the population's choice. There have been warning signs that people are preparing to disturb the elections, but we hope that in one year things would have changed because we are denouncing what is not going well. We have recently put in place the Electoral Commission and one of its objectives is to check that the preparations are going well. The media is also organising to work in synergy so that it can watch correctly and report on what is happening throughout the elections. Civil society is also organising itself as a coalition for monitoring the elections. So we are confident about this electoral machinery.

AW: Do you hope female voters will come and vote next year? Do you think more women will be encouraged to vote in next year's general elections or not?

CM: I think they will. Very recently, I travelled to two provinces to evaluate women's responses to what happened in the 2005 elections.

The goal of that evaluation was to strategise for the next elections in order to increase the number of women in decision-making at the local level. Women were very enthusiastic. They were telling me that, in 2005, they were still threatened by the war situation. They voted according to the prevailing environment. Now, they seem to be awake, they seem to be watching. Seemingly, they want to vote for someone who will improve their living conditions. For me, these ideas are encouraging. They told me that if there are women candidates who deserve their votes, they'd vote for them and even many of them said they are going to be candidates also. For me, it was a good sign that women are very enthusiastic, not only to vote but also to be candidates. We're just collecting ideas to prepare an advocacy paper, so that we can strategise with other women on how to improve the participation of women in politics.

AW: By what percentage do you want to improve the participation of women?

CM: Some people are suggesting 50/50, but we have to be realistic. We are going to lobby first for 30% at the local level as we only have this quota at the National Assembly, the Senate and Government levels. We would like to have these quotas at all levels and maybe in a few years we could lobby for 50%, after we have evaluated ourselves and looked at what we have done. Beyond numbers, we have to work for a real mentality change and teach people to look at things differently in terms of women's rights.

The few women we have in local decision-making are well evaluated. People say they are well organised, open to dialogue and more careful about social issues. These ideas encourage more women to be involved in politics. First, we are going to insist on generalising quotas across all levels and thereafter, maybe I may not be there. But, I know young people are coming up and I think they will lobby for 50%.

AW: Do you think women have made a significant contribution to the peace process?

CM: Yes. I'm well positioned to tell you that we've made a significant contribution, because when the war broke out in my country, it was only women who began to talk about peace, through a movement called Women for Peace. It was created in 1994, four months after the war broke out. That movement evolved later into a coalition of women's organisations called CAFOB. Initially, we were seven organisations that came together to talk about peace and later others joined us. We influenced the peace process through a delegation of women with observer status who attended the peace negotiations. At first, it was not easy because men did not want us there. They told us that our place was in the home, in the bed and in the kitchen. So, it was not easy to make them understand that we had something to say. Even though we did not have a right to speak, we were strategising with the few women who were part of official delegations and we also made written contributions. As a result, 60% of our recommendations were included in the final peace agreement.

At the grassroots level, if women had not played a role, our society would have collapsed. It was women who organised themselves to talk about peace, to bring assistance to the victims, to help those who were internally displaced. They organised themselves to meet the needs of repatriated people and took on many other initiatives in the community to make the population realise the need for peaceful co-existence and co-habitation. There are so many examples which show that even local governors and local administrators in some areas have been helped by women who were trained in conflict resolution. A lot of organisations, such as International Alert and UNIFEM helped to consolidate those initiatives because we were organised. They provided training for us on conflict resolution and other related fields. At the grassroots level, it was women who organised the community after their husbands were killed or when they

had fled outside the country. Unfortunately, those initiatives have been ignored for a long time, but some honest people will tell you that women have had a big role to play in peace-building.

AW: What is the greatest achievement in your political career?

CM: My greatest achievement is having made a society and a Parliament understand that gender issues must be a part of their concerns. There was a time when, if you were talking about gender or women's issues, you seemed to be marginalised, and you seemed to be talking about your personal problem. People didn't take it as a national problem. It took a lot of effort to make men and even other women understand what gender is about. For most people, gender equals women. These ideas of equality in rights, in sharing national incomes, family incomes, and sharing responsibilities didn't come out. Having brought the gender agenda to a high level of the institutions, in Parliament, the Senate and in Government, for me, is a big achievement.

Having successfully introduced quota systems for women's representation in governing institutions and other organisations targeting equality between men and women is a source of satisfaction for me, and for those with whom I have been strategising and lobbying.

We are also happy that we enabled people, especially members of Parliament, to understand that gender-based violence must be a concern for the whole society and to vote into law a penal law including repression of violence against women. Of course, being in Parliament myself and having been elected a representative of one of the minority parties, is also a big achievement.

What is key for me now is the issue of having rights to property. We are fighting to have a law on inheritance, but it's coming along very slowly. The draft bill has been there for a long time, but it doesn't state that it's a right for women to own property.

AW: So what is the biggest hurdle? Why does the Government not want to pass this bill?

CM: The government says the bill may cause social disturbances and may lead women to start fighting with their brothers for land ownership. Today, many people think that women also inherit their husband's property, but it is not true. According to our customary law, only male children inherit from their parents' properties. The government says the population must be sensitised first. For us, we tackle this issue as a human rights issue, something that's contained in our constitution, in CEDAW and all these instruments on women's rights that our country has ratified.

AW: For up-and-coming female politicians, do you think feminism is a pre-requisite?

CM: If you are sensitive to gender issues, in one way or another you are a feminist. I'd like all women to be sensitive to gender issues, whether we call them feminists or not. For me, women who are in positions of influence have no excuse not to push in one way or another for gender equality and for social justice.

AW: What makes a great woman leader?

CM: A great woman leader is a woman who gives her life to her community as a whole. We don't have to distinguish women and men even though women leaders must pay special attention to women because they are more marginalised. The target of women leaders should be creating a society where everyone feels equal. We have to prepare our youth to get rid of bad habits of war, crime, violence, etc. For me, a woman leader is someone who has that vision and serves as a good example. A woman leader creates a world where each person enjoys his or her life without being threatened by others.

AW: You're lobbying to have at least 30% of women in local government; you have more than 30% in the National Assembly. Do you foresee a time when Burundi will have a female president?

CM: Yes, I can foresee a time when Burundi will have a female president. It will not happen soon, but, maybe in 2020, I see a woman being president.

WENDY PEKEUR

Championing the Rights of Women Farm Workers



Wendy Pekeur is General Secretary of Sikhula Sonke, a women-centred Trade Union in South Africa. Sikhula Sonke champions the rights of women workers while addressing issues of housing, safety and land reform. In 2010, Wendy was elected an Ashoka Fellow for Rural Innovation and Farming.

NS: What led to the birth of Sikhula Sonke?

WP: The rationale behind this movement was to locate agency with farmwomen, the primary constituency of the organisation. There was an acknowledgement that we, as farmwomen, have to lead efforts for change in our own lives. Rita Edwards and Deena Bosch from the Women on Farms Project supported us.

NS: Why is it important to have a women-led trade union?

WP: Traditional trade unions all across the world are male-dominated – hence, issues affecting women are often not seen as bread and butter issues. Given the complexity of livelihoods on the farm-lands, it's impossible to effectively tackle the issue of labour rights without an integrated approach to addressing the full range of threats to farmwomen's livelihoods. Trade unions have to be willing to become true social movements of the marginalised. Within such an approach, the significance of a feminised workforce cannot be ignored, and feminism needs to be a defining approach in organising models. If not, it will fail dismally at addressing the challenges faced by workers who also happen to be women. This is why we are successful as Sikhula Sonke – we ensure that all we do is geared at improving the lives of women.

NS: What are the key challenges affecting women farm workers in South Africa today?

WP: On farms, the woman's position is usually determined by her relationship to a male farm worker. For the most part, women are engaged in farm labour as the wife or girlfriend of the male farm labourer.

A woman's labour on the farm is valued less than that of a man, and women generally don't hold a high status within the agricultural hierarchy.

Tenure security has historically been tied to permanent farm labour contracts, which in turn has historically been male. If the male worker loses his job or passes away, it means, quite literally, that an entire family can be out on the streets.

In a context where the physical and emotional abuse of women by male partners is rife, this systemic discrimination against women further compromises women's abilities to leave abusive relationships and further undermines the safety of women and their children. More than 80% of crimes in rural areas are happening on farms. More than 65% of those crimes are violence against women. There are very few prosecutions of perpetrators of violence against women and children.

Thus, the social and living conditions which farmwomen contend with are extremely harsh. Payment of farm workers with alcohol, the 'tot system', was still pervasive on wine farms well into the 1990's. A 2001 study found that the Western Cape has the highest incidence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) in the world. The legacy of alcoholism and FAS, therefore, remains pervasive on the farmlands.

NS: How is Sikhula Sonke responding to these challenges?

WP: One of our key areas of work is empowering women to exercise their rights. We negotiate housing contracts that name the woman to ensure that women are not trapped in abusive relationships.

When male members join the union they have to sign a declaration which states: *“As a male member I undertake to always refrain from the use of violence. I am aware that my membership could be terminated if I am found guilty of violence.”*

We do a lot of training on gender and feminism at workshops and on farms, and educate our members. Members passed a resolution at our 2008 Congress where they said, *“We as communities will take responsibility when violence occurs on our farms.”*

Sikhula Sonke started an alcohol campaign which aims to educate farm workers about alcoholism, its effects and alternative behaviours. Another resolution was passed that ensured all alcohol shops on farms would be closed down and, at the end of 2008, members on a farm in Stellenbosch closed down the first wine shop. We also formed a choir and started doing our own music and songs.

Furthermore, we started to reinstate evicted families which puts us in contempt of court. We told government and farmers we will continue to do so until they put a national moratorium on evictions and farm workers have access to land.

NS: What are some of the unfair labour practices that discriminate against women?

WP: Only getting access to a house through your male counterpart; being a substitute for male labour.

NS: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

WP: Yes and I am a proud one.

NS: What motivates you to continue this work?

WP: I was a farm worker myself and grew up in a home with lots of violence and abuse. I did not understand it as a child. My grandfather worked on a state farm for 46 years and was evicted when he retired.

I want to be of assistance to vulnerable farm worker families until years of oppression and exploitation are reversed.

NS: On a personal level, how do you manage all the challenges that come with this work?

WP: We have started a process to ensure we are proactively building a collective leadership in Sikhula Sonke. I have a mentor who has a lot of experience in mentoring and working with trade unions.

NS: What does the future hold for you?

WP: I want to study to become a constitutional lawyer. I write poetry and compose music and lyrics and formed a choir consisting of farm workers. We hope to produce our first CD before the end of the year.

NS: What does the future hold for Sikhula Sonke?

WP: Sikhula Sonke aims to be the biggest agricultural trade union in South Africa, a home for the most marginalised (which are women, seasonal and migrant labourers), and a school which educates and empowers our members.

The Arts

“The most obvious reason for giving serious attention to the popular arts is their sheer undeniable assertive presence as social facts. They loudly proclaim their own importance in the lives of large numbers of African people. They are everywhere. They flourish without encouragement or recognition from official cultural bodies, and sometimes in defiance of them. People too poor to contemplate spending money on luxuries do spend it on popular arts, sustaining them and constantly infusing them with new life.” (Barber 1987)

For African feminist artists, the Arts – writing, singing, performing, dancing, filmmaking and indeed the whole gamut of creativity – are spaces of expression, standpoint and resistance. African women artists often find themselves working in spaces where there is little (if any) government support for the Arts, and where support, when available, tends to be in the form of corporate sponsorship. Artist signings are usually directed towards mainstream male artists or the few women artists who are seen as commercially viable. The mainstream or official cultural bodies rarely sustain artists who express counter-cultural values, who sing of systemic change or those who write about overcoming social systems that are detrimental to women’s rights.

Stephanie Newell in her introduction to *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*¹¹ states:

“...West African women writers challenge, fracture and rewrite the stereotypes and myths that have surrounded and defined them” (Newell 1997:7)

11 Newell, Stephanie (ed.) 1997. *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*, Zed Books, New Jersey and London.

Challenging, fracturing, re-writing stereotypes and myths are some of the tools that African women writers employ, and these acts of resistance spread far beyond West Africa. Consider the visceral photography of Zanele Muholi from South Africa, the fiery words of Naawal El Saadwi from Egypt, or the futuristic films shot by Wanuri Kahiu of Kenya. These artists respectively shine the spotlight on issues affecting the LGBTQI community, challenge the social systems that seek to oppress women and draw attention to the environmental challenges facing the globe today.

Successful social, political and economic development in Africa must include changes in people's mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. The Arts can be powerful and independent allies in such struggles for true and long-lasting social change. They can also be powerful proponents of the status quo. It cannot be said that all African women involved in the Arts are part of specific movements for change, or deliberately use their art to instigate change, yet it is clear that the power of the Arts has significant impact on the lives of African women. The African feminist artists in the following section are just a few of a growing number of African artists who have expressed their feminist values and principles, their outrage and their desire for change through their work.

AMA ATA AIDOO

Creating Spaces for Women Writers



Ama Ata Aidoo is an internationally renowned Ghanaian writer, novelist and playwright. She has won numerous literary awards including the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa) for her novel Changes. She is also Executive Director of Mbaasem (meaning 'women's affairs') and a Visiting Professor/ writer-in-residence of Africana Studies and Creative Writing at Brown University in the US.

NS: What was your motivation for starting Mbaasem?

AAA: All my life I had wanted a place where I could go and just write. I have realised that writers fit into two distinct groups. A group of us can write in any circumstance, any place, and any time. It doesn't actually matter what else is going on in their lives or where they are, they can write, sometimes a fixed number of words or so many pages a day. Then there are those of us who simply don't seem able to write unless we are in some secluded area, some place, some hideout where we don't feel disturbed and we can collect our thoughts. I don't want to put any judgment on the brand of talent any of these writers have. All I know is that there seems to be a lot more of my group of writers. A lot more writers need that kind of space, need that kind of time and that is why, in other parts of the world, they have writers' colonies exclusively for writers and other artists. We don't have any places like that here and that is why I thought that I should try and do something to rectify that situation for myself and other writers. I started Mbaasem for women only because I knew my energy could not extend to creating something for all writers, so I thought since, in our environment, women have the least access to time, I would create a nurturing space for women in order to increase our literary outputs.

NS: Are there any particular women writers that you have supported through Mbaasem that have got some exciting work coming out or that you are excited about?

AAA: We do have the writers' club, and some of our writers such as Awoshie and Banda Arku have already won the Macmillan Book Prize. The writer Amma Darko is also on our board.

NS: What challenges have you experienced with Mbaasem?

Fundraising has been a huge challenge. However I am reluctant to say, "*I am a writer, not a fundraiser.*" I am reluctant because the question then could be posed, "*So what made you think you could establish a non-profit organisation for women?*" Well, this is the question I have been asking myself, "*Why did I establish Mbaasem?*" On the other hand, if I had not started Mbaasem, I wouldn't even have known how challenging fundraising is.

NS: What have some of Mbaasem's successes been?

Mbaasem seems to be answering so many questions for women writers, which justifies our continued existence. Most recently, we have chalked quite a huge success on behalf of, not only women, but on behalf of all Ghanaian writers. We have succeeded in getting a weekly page in The Daily Graphic¹² exclusively for writers, which is a huge achievement for Mbaasem. Every single Saturday, page ten of the paper is devoted solely to writers. I currently also hold editorial responsibility for the writers' page. It is fantastic to be able to create this space for writers in Ghana.

¹² The Daily Graphic is a leading daily newspaper in Ghana

NS: What kind of writers do you feature on the writers' page?

AAA: Currently the writers' page is focusing on Ghana. At a later stage, we may be able to focus on other African countries. We focus on all writers; older writers, younger writers, and aspiring writers, female, male... Mbaasem also has an *anansesem*¹³ writers' workshop. We are collecting, transcribing and translating *anansesem* for publication. In the second week of publishing the writers' page, we thought it would be nice to do something traditional like *anansesem* and this went down very well with the public. People read the stories and gave good feedback. Now, that particular feature came from Mbaasem's *anansesem* workshop. The next feature in the paper will be by a promising female writer Franka Andoh whose story is dedicated to women.

NS: Is there a particular reason why the page in The Daily Graphic is not dedicated to only female writers?

AAA: There are two main reasons for this. One is because there are no opportunities for writers to showcase their work and I thought that it was my responsibility as Ama Ata Aidoo to provide this space. Secondly, for political reasons, I felt our writers' page would get a better reception if we opened it to both genders. I also wanted people to be aware that, although we are a women's organisation, whenever we see it necessary to reach out to other sectors of society, we would do so. Mbaasem is for us, but I want people to know that although society tends to exclude women from many spaces consciously or unconsciously, I would, in this particular occasion, do the opposite. At the end of the day, the credit for the article goes to Mbaasem. If we see a need, we will respond to it, even if it means going a little outside our own mission.

¹³ *Anansesem* are traditional Ghanaian stories about a mythical spider akin to the Brer Rabbit series.

NS: What are you working on at the moment?

AAA: Writers are superstitious about discussing their work in progress but I will tell you anyway. The working title of my novel is 'Zero Means Downstairs' and it is moderately futuristic. It is set in a period which is 15 to 20 years from now... and that's all I can say for now.

NS: It sounds very exciting

AAA: It is exciting to write, but it has been so difficult for me to make time to work on my own book. In 2004, I got an invitation from the Gender Institute of the University of Cape Town to go and stay there for three solid months, and I thought I was going to continue with the story that I had already started which was on left-handedness – equally intriguing, right? Unfortunately, although I had gone there with the intention of continuing that story, the moment I got there and settled in, this other story came to me so I started writing it. Can you imagine that that was in 2004? Since then, I have not managed to continue with it, because half of the year I am teaching in the US and the other half I am running Mbaasem and editing a writers' page. I read about a situation in Japan in The New Yorker – maybe it is not true, but what was reported is that publishers would literally incarcerate their favourite authors and post a security guard outside to be sure that they were working. People may think that is outrageous but I understood immediately and said, "*I wish somebody would come and pay my bills, put me in a room and post a security guard outside.*" If somebody did that to me, I would have finished my books a long time ago. That is how bad it can get with some of us writers.

NS: What is your ultimate vision for Mbaasem?

AAA: My vision is to implement the basic mission of Mbaasem. I want to set up a writers' fund to take care of the needs of African women writers in order to provide the space and time to write. I want

to provide financial support in two forms. One would be to fund women writers wherever they may live and to build a writers' retreat. Originally, we were only focusing on the retreat, but it has become clear to me that sometimes, try as they might, women cannot leave their places of residence. Sometimes she cannot leave the city, town or country of residence, so if she cannot travel to the retreat in Ghana, then I would want to be able to provide a bursary for her to at least rent a place in Kampala or wherever she is. That way, you give her the flexibility to buy the working week so she can spend the weekend visiting her family if she wishes. However, if you bring her all the way to Accra or wherever Mbaasem decides to hold a meeting, it will be very difficult for her as she will be worrying about what is happening at home, which could also affect her work.

NS: Has this been your experience when organising the writers' retreat?

AAA: Yes, it's a very real challenge. The fewer responsibilities you have in your life the better. For an older woman like me, or for those who didn't have children at all or whose children are all grown up, it is not harrowing to attend a writers' retreat. A younger woman who is not married or doesn't consider her writing a threat to her personal relationships would also be happy to attend a writers' workshop. In my own life, I have had experiences where the man in my life said, *"You always seem to be at your desk, when are you going to take care of me?"* or *"By the way, when do you think you will be less busy?"* These are all insidious ways of undermining your confidence in the work you are doing. They may not necessarily be consciously vicious, but the end results are the same. We have had workshops where women would talk about being harassed on a daily basis by their husbands for writing. We have had incidents reported of husbands waiting until a manuscript is finished, and then one day the woman will come and find it burnt. I know women who have been told by the men in their lives: *"Choose between your writing and me."* You have no idea how

horrible it is out there for women writers. I cannot solve the problems for all the women writers in the world or even all the women writers in Ghana, but at least Mbaasem will be there acting as an inspiration and an incentive to women writers.

NS: You talked earlier about how challenging fundraising is. Is it because donors do not prioritise funding writers?

AAA: I did not say that, so thank you for saying it. First of all, people think writers are not serious – we don't deal with hunger, disease or poverty directly. I am not saying that those areas of our lives are not even more crucial than writing. What people forget is that the Arts keep any society healthy and prosperous. The Arts, literature and games are the oil which keeps the engine that is society running. People don't get it, but at the end of the day, if we get potable water, we get nourishment, we get clothing, and our health is taken care of – what next? I have written a paper on the subject. Look at developed societies: they did not leave their arts behind. They came with their music, literature, and paintings. Artists are the flesh and the blood of the skeleton that is society, but people think writers these days are all bourgeois. What is bourgeois? The reason why we don't have more writers, we don't have more painters, more musicians is precisely because the society doesn't pay any attention to them. I feel so impressed by the musicians in this country that go on making their music in spite of a lack of support.

NS: What has been the impact of receiving a grant from the AWDF?

AAA: Two of our writers have won the Macmillan prize. Our grant has enabled us to run a workshop that brought writers together. Some of these writers have not even had the courage to consider themselves as possible writers, although they had written scripts. We have

been able to provide a place that writers can come to. Sometimes I get calls from people at 7 a.m. and I have to say, “*Please contact me on Monday.*” That in itself is quite encouraging. We even did work on violence against women some time ago. The grant provided by the AWDF has enabled our continued existence.

NS: You are an inspiration to African women and girls. What is your inspiration?

AAA: Well it goes back a long way. I think that basically I began to write because I love a good story. I discovered this about myself at a very early age when my mother used to tell me stories. We would wake up at 3 a.m. in the morning and she would start telling me stories. We also had a storyteller in my village and I was lucky to have teachers who were inspirational. Right from primary school, through Wesley Girls, I had teachers who encouraged storytelling and drama. I was just lucky. Nobody ever told me, “*You are a girl therefore you can’t do it*”. I have been affirmed throughout my life by my parents, the people in my village, and close family members and friends. Then of course later in life I read people like Chinua Achebe. It was something else to read *Things Fall Apart*... and then I had people like Mrs. Efua Sutherland who encouraged me a lot.

NS: Which issue or issues on the continent do you feel most passionate about?

AAA: This is hard. I think it’s the general marginalisation of women, even in a society like ours, which when compared to others appears not to be that bad. We do not have honour killings for example. I feel very passionate about women’s education. In Ghana, young girls seem so unprotected in the school system: men sleep with them, they get pregnant, and then they say you can’t take exams. The pregnant girls have to leave school and nobody looks for the person who made her pregnant. It could be a classmate, the class teacher, the headmaster;

it could be friends of the headmaster... What is this? That also bothers me a lot. The fate of young women and girl children and then we dare, the society dares, to call children whores.

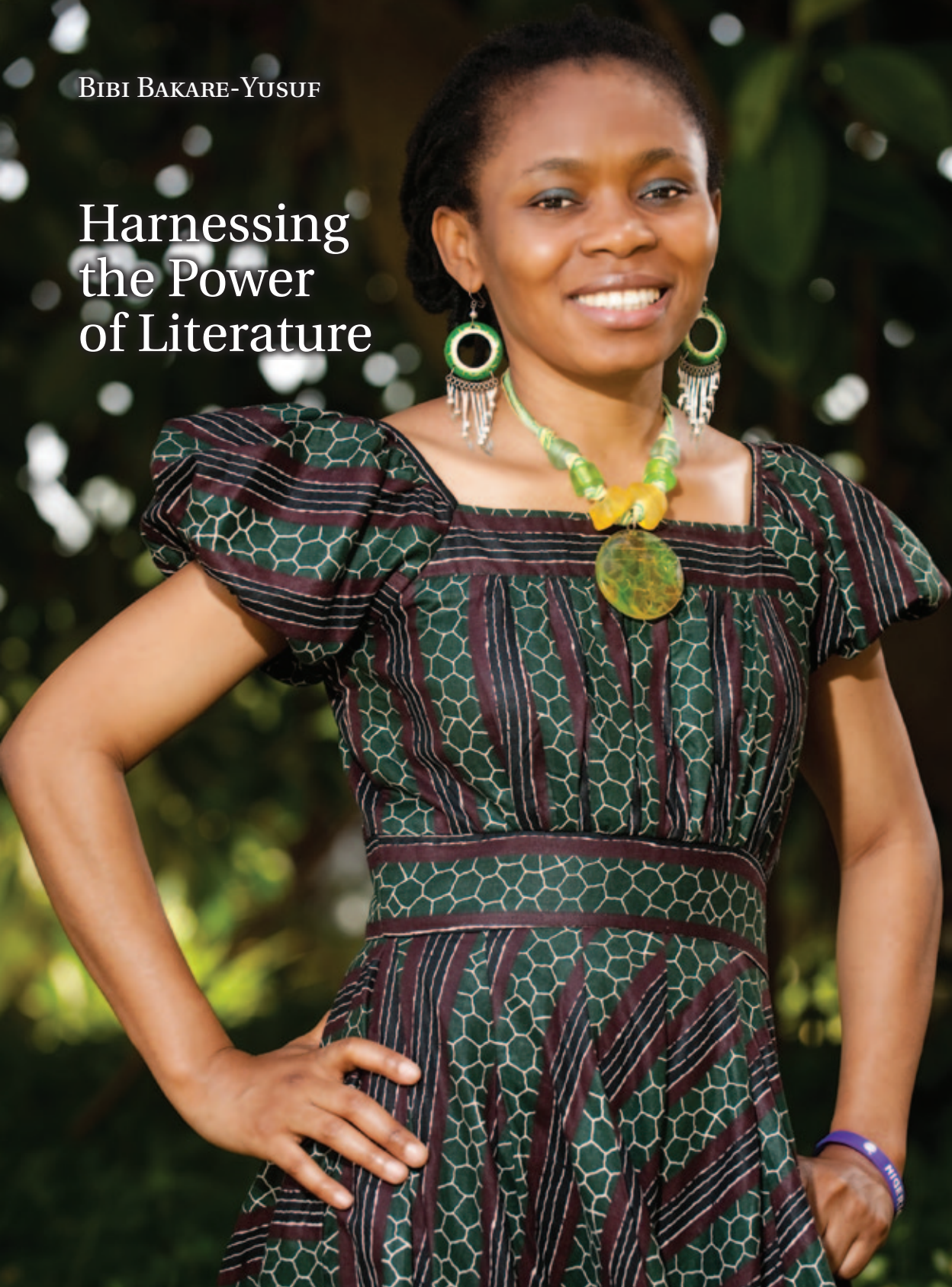
The 'witchery thing' that churches are now portraying also bothers me. I have seen paid-for programmes where they conduct spiritual sessions to cast out witches. They are always women and occasionally you will see a male, usually a young boy. I think it is so dangerous and retrogressive. It is against people's human rights. I don't know what to do about it. It's demeaning.

NS: Final question, what is your message to aspiring female African writers?

AAA: My message is never tell yourself you cannot write. Do not let anyone or anything stop you from writing. If you want to write, just go for it. Write and then worry later about whether it is any good or whether you can get it published. Do the writing first and worry about everything else later.

BIBI BAKARE-YUSUF

Harnessing the Power of Literature



Bibi Bakare-Yusuf is a co-founder and publisher of Cassava Republic Press based in Abuja, Nigeria. Cassava Republic is grounded in feminist principles and publishes high-quality African fiction, non-fiction and children's books. Bibi is also an independent scholar and a researcher.

NS: What motivated you to start Cassava Republic Press?

BBY: There were several motivating factors. When I moved back to Nigeria in 2003, I discovered that there were many new African writers that were being published abroad whose books were not available locally. Whenever they were available, they were expensive. When I set up Cassava Republic, I wanted African books to be accessible and affordable to Africans. I also wanted to develop a platform through which Africans could read each other without mediation through Europe. We are not quite there yet, however.

I also felt that novels or works of the imagination provide a way for us to think through solutions and imagine different futures. They provide a window to the world in a way that stretches us beyond the concerns of everyday life, even as they evoke the everyday. The best writers can look at all that we are and reflect us back to ourselves; they can collect our scattered pieces and join them together in a way that can either make sense or completely confound us.

On this continent, while we talk so much about the all-too-obvious problems of infrastructure, disease, underdevelopment and so on (even though they are important), what we need to talk more about, and is fast receding or we are not exercising, is our imagination. I thought that if we can just exercise our imaginative intellect a little bit more, we might come up with solutions to our problems; we might be able to think outside of our present existential crisis. At the moment, we are locked into a narrative that we can't seem to escape, a narrative of hopelessness and helplessness. Provoking the imagination is one way to step outside of that narrative. This might

be considered naive, but I think the power of imagination, and the cultural production that issues from it, is something we ought to focus more on.

To me, reading books provide a way for us to return to ourselves in solitude. On this continent, there's a lot of noise around us, and we don't have time to just pause and reflect, especially women, because we have so many competing demands – trying to attend to husbands, children, family, work, community, religious activities and so on. All these activities require engagement with others outside of the self. With books, we can momentarily escape the mundanity of our lives in a way that gives us pleasure, escape and release. I have always thought that publishing creative books would be something worth exploring, however, I did not think it would be me. Although I come from a family of entrepreneurs, my own training is in academia. I thought getting friends to do it would be a better option, but nobody was interested as there is little money to be made in publishing.

NS: Are your friends right when they say there is no money in publishing?

BBY: Yes, they are right. Even though it's not lucrative at the moment, I think that the very fact that Cassava Republic is creating value in the world in and of itself is something worth doing. With time, the money will come – at least I hope it will come so that we can do more of what we are doing and reach more people. Like Maya Angelou said: "Do the things you love and the money will come." Even if the money doesn't come, I am glad that I started Cassava Republic Press. I think it's an inspiration to others about what is possible. We are on a continent where so many things need doing and we have the unique opportunity to be one building block among many for this continent. I could never have started a publishing company in Europe. It would never have occurred to me, because the market over there is saturated; so many needs are already met. But here, we are on virgin soil. From my perspective, this is the best time in our history to be an African and

a woman, because the world is ours and we have the opportunity to mould it in our own image and the way we want it to be.

Once I started Cassava Republic Press, I knew that I had a unique opportunity to bring something into the world the way I want it. I wanted a feminist press, a press that would project all the best feminist visions and interventions in every book we publish. I wanted to work with writers in a conscious and self-reflexive way. However, gauging the pulse of the nation, I realised that people are extremely averse to anything feminist, so I decided not to be too explicit about our ideals. But internally (our policies, practices, etc.), Cassava would be a feminist-run organisation. Feminist sensibilities are reflected in the kinds of books that we choose to publish, even when men write them.

For example, in one particular collection of short stories by a male author, there's a tale of a woman in a loveless marriage. She meets a former lover; she has an affair with him and at the end of the story she goes back to her husband. For me, that was not a satisfying ending, it recapitulated back on patriarchal norms: this is what women do – women stay with their husbands, no matter what. With a feminist lens, I suggested to the writer that he reconsider the ending so that it remains open and ambiguous, so that we don't know whether she leaves or she stays. Most people who have read it can't decide what happens next. Leaving the ending ambiguous is important because it shows that women sometimes stay and sometimes leave a loveless marriage; that they have sexual desires, even if society tries to repress and suppress them. This is especially true of the Abrahamic faiths, Christianity more so than Islam because Islam does recognise women's sexuality.

In another story in this collection, the author portrays women abandoning their children. Now, from a certain feminist perspective it may not be good to show women who abandon their children, but for me, I felt that it was important to show that women do not have to carry single-handedly the burden of parenthood in the way that we are expected to, especially in the oppressive cult of motherhood

that we have on the continent. That is where I see the power of literature to really transform, to shake us out of our stupor and force us to confront things that are not comfortable. Through conscious selection and editing, publishing becomes a political act and an example of feminist practice and activism.

NS: That is interesting because my follow-up question was going to be, *“How do your politics and your work as a feminist influence the work you do?”* but I think you have answered that perfectly.

BBY: All that I do is shaped by a feminist consciousness, praxis and theory. Therefore, feminist considerations inform the choice of material that I choose to publish. Even if I like a story enough and that story has dubious, questionable characters I would want to work with the author to create a situation where characters or the narrative arc are in a critical dialogue with that which is questionable from a feminist perspective. For example, the author may write something and my feminism may make me more conscious of what the author has unconsciously written. So, my task is to work with the author to draw their attention to, not only their craft of writing, but also the ideological effect of what they are trying to convey.

I will give you an example. We have just published some children's books, and one of the picture books opens with the sentence: *“My mother is a mechanic and my father is a nurse.”* We worked together with the author to arrive at this opening sentence and, in so doing, we began the process of tinkering with expectations about gender roles and gender norms. We then worked with the illustrator to ensure that the images also challenged gender expectations, such as portraying a present and care-giving father.

In my opinion, fiction should be less concerned with representing reality and more focused on bringing in new realities or looking at existing realities afresh. We have to constantly create the realities that we want, and if we find them unacceptable or unsatisfying we can create new ones. This is the potential power of publishing or film or any kind of cultural production – the open-ended potential for creating new ways of looking. It's about bringing in the world you want and creating the world in the best of your own image. So, in yet another situation, we published a book about a girls' football team in a picture book (I see picture books as one of the critical ways in which we can reframe ideas and expectations about what it is to be a young girl and what it is to be a young woman). The story was not designed to say girls should be masculine, but simply to say that girls can also play football – simple. Another story involves a boy teaching his sister how to dance for a competition she will attend. By publishing these stories, you are showing boys and girls all that is possible for them to be and become. You are showing them a diversity of identities and activities in which they can participate. Feminist consideration permeates all that we do at Cassava Republic.

NS: How have your books been received?

BBY: There has been a lot of goodwill. People have said, "*We are grateful you are there,*" and that's really touching. For me, going into some faraway village in Taraba State (in central Nigeria) and seeing one of our books gives me great satisfaction. Even though I know we are not making money yet, these things keep hope alive. The fact that people are so ready to support us makes me feel that we are on the right track. There's a man who I know will always buy a few copies of each of our books. He read one of our books, 26A and called to say, "*Thank you for publishing that book because I now understand what*

happened to my daughter.”That’s the power of literature because this is a novel that talks about the experience of girlhood, sexual violation and mental disintegration. The story resonated with him and he is now a great supporter of Cassava Republic Press. Our books have been well received and we are grateful to our readers and the writers who create them in the first place.

NS: I know it’s a tough question, but which of your books are you most proud of?

BBY: Yes, it is a tough question. I am proud of all of our books for different reasons. There are books like Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s *In Dependence*, which is an historical romance. Our writers don’t often write about love, of being completely swept over by somebody. They tend to write about the pain and the sorrows of existence. However, this is a book about joy, desire and longing, mixed with the politics and energy of the independent and post-independent period in Africa. I am also proud of *Cloth Girl*, by Marilyn Heward-Mills. It is a book about class, race and the lethal combination of African and European patriarchy at the cusp of Ghana’s independence. It is also a book about friendship across class and race. I am also very proud of Teju Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief* because it was the first novel that we acquired, edited and worked on from start to finish and I think it is a wonderful piece of work. Mentioning these ones does not mean that I am not proud of the others, but these titles are what come to mind right now.

NS: What do you think of the state of publishing in Africa generally?

BBY: African publishing is not in the state that one would like it to be in. We don’t have the capacity at Cassava Republic Press to publish all the wonderful manuscripts that we get. If we are to get really serious about cultural production, if we are to get serious about education

on this continent, then the government needs to support the culture industry, of which publishing is an important part. I am not just talking about support for textbook publishing, but for the publishing of books people just read to escape. Sometimes we need to escape from our realities.

I would like for publishing on this continent to be better than it is currently. I would like publishers on the continent to collaborate more and we have already started that process in a project that we are doing with Chimurenga in South Africa and Kwani Trust in Kenya.

I would like for our government to invest more in education because, with such investment, publishers will see the end result in the kinds of quality manuscripts we receive.

NS: Do you think women writers face more challenges when it comes to getting published?

BBY: I don't necessarily think women face more challenges when it comes to actually getting published. However, when it comes to writing, women may have more challenges, especially if they're married, have children, are working, and have competing tasks and demands. Also, for a lot of women, confidence is an issue – to have confidence, to recognise that their voice is important, that they have something to say that is worth saying, something that is worth listening to is a challenge for many women. Lack of confidence can be a barrier to people putting pen to paper. But I think that as more women get published, others will have more confidence to write, to see writing as an important vocation. Currently, 90% of the manuscripts that we receive are from men and this has to change. Women across the board, and not just in publishing, exhibit a kind of reticence about their own voice and abilities. We need to mould young women to be more confident, to say "*I can.*"

We need more women to be confident, and parents are responsible for their children's confidence or lack of it. It is parents, especially mothers, who constantly affirm or belittle their children, especially

their girls. Affirmation or belittlement will have ramifications on how they grow up, how they see themselves in relation to others and their own abilities. With such a background, this may take the talented writer longer to find her voice. Yes, writing is about talent and skills, it is also very much about confidence and courage. So these are the kinds of challenges women face. I think once women overcome the barrier of the writing process, publishing their work should seem as doable or as challenging as any other.

NS: I am curious, are there any African women leaders that you look up to?

BBY: I look up to quite a few African women, but they are not leaders in the limelight. They are leaders within their own spheres of influence, but not people who are widely known.

NS: So what is your understanding of leadership? Or what is your personal take on leadership?

BBY: The issue of leadership is something I have thought a lot about, but of late I have thought more about followership, because when I think of Africa and the problem of bad leadership, I think maybe we should start investing more in thinking and activities around building good followership. When we cultivate good followers who make demands and build accountability pressures then we will get the kind of leaders that we desire. Because of the kind of followers we have, we get the leaders that we have. Good followers help to create good leaders and bad followers leave us with bad leaders. Part of our *raison d'être* at Cassava Republic is helping to create good followers through cultivating minds and helping to create a nation and a continent full of people who ask questions and demand answers.

One of my favourite closing lines from a book is from Frantz Fanon who said in *White Skin, Black Masks*: “*O my body, make of me a body that will always question.*” The question is sometimes more important than the answer. What we have for the most part currently are bad followers who don’t ask questions. Therefore our leaders get away with murder – literally. So for me, good followership will inspire good leadership. As an individual, my ability to lead effectively is helped by having people around who constantly and consistently ask questions of me.

RUDO CHIGUDU

Demystifying Sex and Sexuality through Theatre



Rudo Cee is a Zimbabwean feminist, 'vagina warrior', and a member of Katswe Sistahood. Katswe Sistahood is an organisation of young dynamic women demystifying issues of sex and sexuality. For this work, Rudo has become popularly known as a vagina warrior. She has a passion for theatre and other performing arts and is an unapologetic feminist.

NS: Where did your passion for the theatre come from?

RC: I was born full of drama, and so I was naturally attracted to theatre and other arts projects in school. Theatre allowed me a freedom to express myself that I didn't find in other places. What I had was not so much a passion for theatre, but a desire for self-expression in ways that might be thought of as rather unusual. In theatre, I found a place that allowed me to express myself without inhibition. Only in theatre can a dry log be a boat, a snake, a gun, a corpse all in one act. Theatre breaks all the rules and pushes boundaries in a way that inspires me.

NS: How have you used the theatre as a space to address issues around sexuality, sexual pleasure and the persistent challenge of violence against women?

RC: Theatre allows you to speak and even challenge your audience in a non-confrontational manner. It allows you to place humour where there might be tensions, and thus creates room for taboo issues of sexuality, sexual pleasure and gender-based violence. Through the Zimbabwean vagina monologues, Katswe Sistahood puts on stage the life experiences of young women. These stories cannot be challenged as they are told by their owner. How can our audience deny rape, issues of sexual orientation, sex work and abortion when the young women whose reality it is are standing right in front of them?

NS: What advantages, if any, have you derived from using theatre as a tool for women's empowerment?

RC: We have seen quite a few. Firstly, unlike statistics, no one questions the legitimacy of the issues raised as the stories are told by their owners. Secondly, because our audience does not feel directly challenged, they are more willing to engage in dialogue about issues they otherwise would be uncomfortable with. Thirdly, theatre has allowed us to tackle issues of sex work, sexual orientation and abortion that were otherwise unacceptable topics. Theatre has allowed us to speak about taboo issues in the presence of parliamentarians, ministers, revered chiefs and other gate keepers, and even had them discussing the issues.

NS: How did you get involved with Katswe Sistahood?

RC: I have been with Katswe Sistahood since the beginning when it was just a space and a mobile one at that. Later, it moved from our living rooms to parks, art galleries, anywhere where we had the physical space to meet and talk as friends and sisters about our lives, our struggles, our joys. We just created for ourselves a space where the unthinkable was thinkable and the unspeakable was the conversation – a space where we laughed and cried. We later realised that the space was also needed by other young women, and therefore tried to create similar spaces in the different communities. This was supported by our sisters who in many ways mentored and guided us on how to focus our energies and challenged us to do something about the realities we were struggling with.

NS: Who or what is a ‘vagina warrior’?

RC: *(She laughs)* Vagina warriors have become quite popular. Vagina warrior is the name we give to the young women who have had the courage to go on stage and speak about their pain, pleasure, anger, hatred, love and passion in relation to issues of sexuality and gender-based violence. These young women acknowledge the politics of our sexuality and use themselves and their stories as a tool to raise consciousness and awareness in public. With their performances, they demonstrate their power and ability to speak and this also becomes an advocacy tool around the key issues of vagina politics. Many shy away from the term, but for us, a vagina warrior is one who recognises that the name itself is a political statement. Vagina warriors question why a girl who is raised never to say “vagina” in vernacular is expected once raped to name this part of their anatomy in vernacular and in graphic detail describe the violation using this same ‘*bad, dirty, nasty*’ language.

NS: Tell me a bit more about the comic book you created in remembrance of your friend, Nothando.

RC: The comic was in remembrance of a dear friend, Nothando Tagwireyi, who died at the age of 22 as a result of gender-based violence: she was a talented guitarist and vocalist. Her passing on left us with many questions about the impact the work we were doing as an institution was really having on young women. In many ways, we felt we had failed her, but we have had to pull ourselves together to realise that there are many other young women like her who need the Sistahood. We also realised the gravity of the things many young women ignore such as possessiveness, a slap across the face and emotional and verbal abuse by partners and boyfriends, as each of these could really culminate into a tragic loss of life.

NS: What kind of response have you had to the CD YOWLI created with poetry and music around gender-based violence?

RC: Goodness, the CD is very popular. It showcases a powerful poem titled '*Tbhinya*' ('rapist' in Shona language) which really spells out that even the people you love, are related to, or close to, become nothing more than a rapist the moment they violate you. They cease to be a friend, husband, father, religious leader, teacher, police officer; they cease to deserve your respect the moment they fail to respect you. It's been played on *kombis* (slang for commuter omnibus) and at many of our events, during marches and road shows. Many people stop to listen because it is catchy, but it also dispels a lot of myths about rape that involves people we know, about love and respect. We have found it appeals to the young and old and is a strategy we wish to build on.

NS: What are your thoughts on possible synergies between activism and the arts?

RC: I feel that the arts are a powerful tool for activism especially where young people are concerned. Everything that we hear constantly and repetitively is internalised and using the arts in a similar way – to really raise consciousness as well as affirm young women – becomes profound. Instead of watching movies with vulnerable and weak women or listening to music that objectifies young women, we need to offer viewing and listening that affirms, dispels stereotypes and inspires young women to greatness.

A close-up portrait of Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Black woman with dark skin and long, dark dreadlocks. She is smiling warmly at the camera, showing her teeth. She has a small, dark nose ring in her left nostril and is wearing a gold hoop earring in her left ear. The background is a solid, deep blue. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

Channelling
Creativity
Through
Film &
Prose

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean writer and filmmaker. The Zimbabwe International Book Fair listed her debut novel Nervous Conditions as one of 'Africa's 100 Best Books'. Tsitsi is also a treasurer for Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, organisers of the International Images Film Festival for Women.

ND: “I was not sorry when my brother died” is the somewhat startling opening sentence to *Nervous Conditions*. How does your own experience of familial relationships inform those in the book, and what are some of the themes that underpin these relationships?

TD: The relationships depicted in *Nervous Conditions* are very much informed by relationships within my own family as I was growing up. While I was fortunate that my father believed in education for girl children and could afford to send me to school, patriarchy was the predominant ideology. It permeated everything – who got the most food, whose birthday was remembered and so forth. Even as an adult, I can remember my father getting cross with my brother for letting me, a woman, hold the family car keys. I do not know how I was supposed to get married as my brother called me a whore for having a boyfriend, and my mother always described men as being bees around a honey pot. I am just so glad I can clear my mind of all that nonsense, and I am sure most of my family except my mother grew out of it too. It grieves me to see how women fall into the patriarchy trap. They either learn total helplessness and become quite unable to manage their affairs – as was the case with my mother – or they become bitter and misogynistic because they can only display their dissatisfaction towards other women, hence the ‘pull-her-down syndrome’. This is

one of the more subtle themes informing the relationship between Maiguru and Tambu's mother in *Nervous Conditions*. I am so glad there are so many women on the continent tackling patriarchy head on and without shame now. Young men in Zimbabwe come up to me and ask me whether I am aware that there are a lot of men today who have understood the message. This is good progress and it will spare men and women a lot of suffering.

ND: Did you always know that you would create a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*? What was that process like?

TD: No, I did not always know I would create a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*. When I first wrote *Nervous Conditions*, no one would publish it. I felt such a failure and I had put so much energy into the writing that I stopped writing. When Women's Press picked up the book several years later, my publisher, the late Ros de Lanerolle, asked me to do the sequel. I agreed, but realised that two novels would not work structurally. I liked the idea of making the life of a village girl the subject of three novels and so I began the sequel. The process was slow and laborious because I had enrolled at film school in Berlin by the time the book was published. I found that learning to write for film and writing prose did not work for me. Besides, the Berlin environment while fascinating was so strange that I did not have enough still time to hear myself. I also got married while I was in Berlin and had children. I only started writing prose seriously again a few years ago. I am currently working on the third and last part of what is turning out to be the Tambudzai trilogy. It is *wicked* and I am loving it! In it, Tambudzai pulls her life together and comes to a kind of resolution.

ND: You started your creative life as a writer, and then became a filmmaker. Which of these artistic media do you feel most strongly drawn to or most comfortable working with and why?

TD: I love both film and prose. Prose is demanding. It is like recording every molecule of oxygen when you take a breath or every one of carbon dioxide when you exhale. Film is bolder and bigger. The composition of the whole frame is as important as the elements. I find both media make their creative demands in different ways, although I personally find writing for film easier. I think it is more permissible to develop the craft aspect of screenwriting when writing for film because the spectacle that is consumed is not in the written word but in the visual narrative. Whereas with prose, the spectacle is in the word itself so craft can easily suffocate creativity if one is not careful. I have to push myself to overcome the loneliness of writing and face my demons on the page. I am generally much more playful in film. It is great fun when the crew and cast get into experimental mode and you know that anything can happen. I like the social aspect of filmmaking.

ND: How do your politics as a feminist affect your life and work?

TD: I cannot distinguish the effects of my politics as a feminist on my life and work because I believe I am only alive today because I am a feminist. That means feminism is my life. A lot of my friends who faced challenges similar to mine did not make it this far. Being a feminist enabled me to fight for my place in the world as I was meant to from an early age. Being a feminist enabled me to bond with the

right women who were supportive and who mitigated the impact of women who would have liked to destroy me. So I owe my life to feminism. Feminism is like air to me. It informs and makes possible everything I do.

ND: I was excited to see your film *I Want a Wedding Dress* at the 22nd Pan-African Film and Television Festival (FESPACO), but felt frustrated at its conclusion – the ‘good’ wife returns to care for the philandering Mahachi who infected her with HIV and threw her out. Wasn’t that too easy a conformation to ‘gender-appropriate behaviour’ as stipulated by the social constructs that govern our society?

TD: Indeed it is a frustrating ending, but so true in economically shattered Zimbabwe. Few women find the strength to leave relationships, no matter how abusive they are, in these disastrous times. The deeper question is, “*Should a woman leave under such circumstances? When her husband is dying of AIDS?*” I think that is a question each woman would answer for herself. Where would such a woman go? Would she live alone? Would she find another partner if she wanted a relationship and maybe unwittingly get caught up in another sexual network? I think these are the things that go through women’s minds. I think a younger character would have left, but older women certainly find it more difficult. Staying was true to Mai Mahachi’s character. If she was going to leave, she would have done so much earlier on in the relationship, probably even before the film began as she was aware of her husband’s infidelity. A different ending would have required that the film take a different route in order to offer an alternative. I do not know how relevant that would have been to Zimbabwe, and probably to most societies on the continent. I think I can help women by understanding why they make the choices they do and starting from there, even when these choices go against my personal grain.

ND: You have been at the forefront of the International Images Film Festival for Women for a decade now. What have been some of your proudest moments in organising this festival?

TD: My proudest moment at IIFF was launching the festival in 2002. That happened with the support of three great women, two who worked at the British Embassy, and one who was the Belgian Ambassador to Zimbabwe at the time. It was so wonderful to see women rallying together. I was really proud of a training programme we began called the Women's Narrative Workshops which produced two short films. A lot of the young women who graduated from those workshops are now employed in the sector. I am proud of having groomed a successor, and setting up an office that assists the livelihoods and channels the creativity of over 20 creative women. I am proud of having stood my ground by insisting on 35mm format for the main competition, so that young Zimbabwean filmmakers learn not to compromise on production values and aesthetics. I am proud of having survived in an environment where it often looked as though most people would have been glad to see this woman's initiative fail. I was proud to step down from being the festival director, knowing I had done a good job under remarkably difficult circumstances.

ND: Which African women writers and filmmakers are you currently most excited about and why?

TD: Sefi Atta and Sefi Atta and Sefi Atta. Her writing is so vivid and direct it sweeps me along. And I can recognise myself which I find so important. Added to that, I like what I see, even when it is not particularly flattering. Fanta Nacro is my all-time favourite filmmaker. I love the humour, lightness and warmth she brings to the most serious themes. I do not know where she gets her sense of humour from. It would never even occur to me to be humorous in that manner, because my edges tend to be rougher, but I love her style!

ND: What are your hopes and fears for the African film industry, especially with regard to its portrayal of women?

TD: I am petrified that the African film industry is going to entrench the subordination of women in so many ways. A film that illustrates this is the soft porn splatter movie *Viva Riva* that is being celebrated all over the world. I was absolutely shocked when I saw this film in Oslo a couple of months ago. As an African woman, I simply could not look at the images of African women that were presented. There was no agency, no dignity, just degradation. Mind you, most of the characters were like that, but it was so intense where the women were concerned. A single film should not define an industry, but where there is so little production – outside Nollywood which has similar challenges – one film can set a trend. It would be easy for Zimbabwean filmmakers to fall into this kind of trap. There is not any professional training in film skills in the country so people can pick up a camera and shoot from the gut without reflecting. A few people including young men, however, are beginning to be more aware of the power the medium has to build a better society or to entrench archaic destructive values and stereotypes. This is why we launched the New Man section at the International Images Film Festival for Women. Films in this section are about men who do things differently in a more conscious manner. I hope that there will be more money for filmmaking on the continent, so that more diverse stories can be told and so that more women are able to tell their stories independently. Our governments have to take up the responsibility of funding the sector seriously. They have to learn about the medium and understand it beyond thinking of it as a vehicle for their propaganda or as an entertainment cash cow. Once the films are made, they have to be seen, so I hope that we will be able to build up serious and diverse distribution networks outside of Nollywood and M-Net. I also want to see more people watching African films. This is where Nollywood has had a good influence. It has opened people up to the idea that

we can watch films about ourselves, and destroyed the notion that films must consist of stories about others. That is a starting point and I look forward to the continent moving on from there. I also want to see a lot more collaboration, rather than the intense competition taken to destructive levels that so often prevails at the moment. Co-production is the only model to follow for a growing and learning film industry. Finally, I want to see more international standard training institutions north of South Africa. These institutions should also teach about how agency and power are inscribed into the film narrative so that we understand how easily we can use film to subvert our own agendas if we are not properly informed.

ND: Any final thoughts that you would like to share?

TD: Thank goodness for women like you, Nana, who go out supporting other women. My heart is always with those brave sisters and brothers who dare to imagine a better way and then, not only imagine, but who work to create that better way. I feel so honoured to have been nurtured by this group of people and finally to belong. I want to continue doing what I can to spread that spirit far and wide.



AYESHA HARRUNA ATTAH

Seeking a Community of Writers

Ayesha Harruna Attah is part of a new generation of Ghanaian creatives who use their art as a tool to address issues of social concern. She wrote and published her first novel Harmattan Rain with a fellowship from Per Ankh Publishers and Trust Africa. Harmattan Rain was shortlisted for the 2010 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Africa Region.

NS: Ayesha, your book Harmattan Rain has been received to great acclaim and recently been nominated as a finalist for the Commonwealth First Book award. How do you feel about your nomination?

AHA: I feel really honoured, humbled and a little confused... a bundle of emotions.

NS: Why are you confused?

AHA: I don't know. It's just one of those things that hit you, and you have to pinch yourself and ask if what you are getting is real? So I think that is where the confusion comes in. You feel like you are almost in a dream and you will be waking up and it's not going to be real, but in a happy confused way.

NS: I feel like a lot of women especially connect with your book, mainly because you've focused on three generations of women. Is there a particular reason why you choose to do this?

AHA: I think it was a very selfish reason; I had always wanted to write about my family. I neither met my paternal nor maternal grandfathers, so for a long time there were these matriarchs in my family. For me, there has always been a strong woman. My dad is a great, great

role model to me but the heads of my family seem to be my grandmothers and then my aunties and my mother. Also, I have a group of strong female friends, so I have always believed in the power of women. Consequently, for my first book, it was the most natural thing for me to write about women.

Interestingly, these days, I write short stories with male protagonists, so it's not like I'm stuck to that genre, but it did (writing about women) seem like the most natural thing to do when I started out writing. Even when I do have a male protagonist, there is still a woman lurking behind somewhere so I can't run away from it and I think the women end up stealing the show.

NS: Do you think that some of the issues that the protagonists in *Harmattan Rain* were dealing with are issues that a lot of women in different generations identify with?

AHA: Definitely. There are so many things happening in *Harmattan Rain*. First, you have the woman running away from her father which I guess symbolically is a woman running away from the current system in place, patriarchy, and then you have a woman who becomes a victim – she falls pregnant thinking that some man is going to save her from the world, and it doesn't quite turn out the way she wants it to. She has to build a family on her own; she has to start from zero depending on no one. I feel like there are so many women in the world today who have to grapple with all that, and have no support systems, raising children who are going wayward. You know, sacrificing everything to make sure their children have a better life than they did. There's that end of it. And then there is a young woman who is a little selfish; a lot of people have asked me if that is my story, and I refuse to say (*she laughs*). No, she is not really me...

NS: She is probably the one in the book I identify with the most. I didn't see her as selfish at all...

AHA: Well our generation is quite self-centred and we are all (that is what I think anyway) a bunch of navel-gazing young people, it's all about us. And then we do have people breaking through and thinking about certain things once in a while, and I think she sort of gets to that point at the end of the story where she thinks about going back home to become a doctor. Her story is the story of the immigrant, leaving home, and coming to America and dealing with newness, strangeness, information overload and how you react to them. Some people are lucky and don't fall into certain traps, but she does and comes out of it whole. I think there are all these threads in the story that a lot of women can identify with – young, old, living in Ghana, living in Barbados, wherever... One woman I went to college with, she is from Barbados and she actually said to me, *"You know that was my story."*

NS: Some of these issues you've mentioned, patriarchy, women-headed households, and women struggling to raise families are all issues that women, the African women's movement and the global women's movement are grappling with. These are all issues that are of concern to feminists. What's your position on feminism?

AHA: The big question (*she laughs*). I tend to run away from labels, just because... but then I guess I know deep down inside that I am a feminist, and especially because of my father. When I was growing up, I remember him one day saying, specifically in reference to himself

that he is a feminist. I was pretty young when I heard him say that for the first time and I was wondering why he was saying that. But he is truly one of the most feminist men I know of out there, pro-feminist men I should say. And then I went to an all-women's college, which surely made me run away from feminism even more (*she laughs*).

NS: Why was that the case? Shouldn't it be the opposite?

AHA: I guess I just find myself running away from anything that is just in-my-face and it was a little over-the-top sometimes in college. It took going back to West Africa, to a small village in Senegal where I wrote my book, to awaken those feelings of having to defend myself as a woman all the time. Even within a small group of writers, I found myself constantly defending womanhood and pointing out things that weren't right with the social system.

NS: What were some of the issues you had to deal with?

AHA: Oh wow, I just found myself on the battlefield all the time. Take the idea of polygamy, for instance. Some people say it is an African thing, but then when I was working under Ayi Kwei Armah (he is one of those people who don't believe in just making an argument for arguments sake, he believes in going to the source), he had us do this exercise where we researched ancient Egyptian culture, which was similar to ancient African culture. This exercise was interesting because a lot of families in ancient Egypt were monogamous (one man, one woman), and these go back years and years before people claimed that polygamy was instituted in Africa. It was only royalty that tended to have more than one wife. This was very interesting and, armed with this information, I set about defending my point of view, but the Senegalese men responded, "*No, no, no, polygamy is very*

African, I don't care what you are talking about." So that was one of the big things.

Even the idea of women educating themselves or finding a career was in contention; in this village, a lot of the young women didn't have much to look forward to. A lot of young women tended to fall pregnant and ended up having to depend on their families for sustenance. Their dreams went as far as, maybe selling scarves on the beach. So I had to sit up and say this isn't right, there is more you can do with your life. There were two girls I started teaching; one of them wanted to be a journalist and that was refreshing. In teaching these girls I would say to them, "*You can go to the Internet café, you can learn how to type, you can learn how to do these little things, do well in school, go to university, and break out of this circle that your community seems to be stuck in.*"

NS: So how did that influence your thoughts on feminism?

AHA: We still have a long way to go, at least in West Africa; I think we have a long, long way to go. But, it's still refreshing because these young women actually came to me (I didn't seek them out) and said, "*We want to learn English...* (this was in Senegal, a francophone country), *we want to learn how to use the Internet, we want to type.*" It was refreshing to see young women actually decide that they wanted their lives to be different. There are some good stories out there and I still believe that there is a lot to be done.

NS: I know you said earlier on that you hate labels, but would you call yourself a feminist?

AHA: At heart, I'm one. I was labelled one though – in Senegal, especially with my little group of writers. Especially having attended a women's college, a lot of people assume I am one. Deep down inside, yes I am, though I refuse to put on the label.

NS: Why?

AHA: I don't know. Even terms like 'man', 'woman'... I feel labelling just allows for stereotyping and for putting people in boxes. Like, you are a woman so you shouldn't do this or you can't do this just because you believe in that. Christian, Muslim.... I just don't like labels.

NS: What's new in Ayesha Harruna Attah's life?

AHA: I'm trying to keep on writing; I have a short story collection going which I think is finally coming together. The short story collection is the most exciting thing I have going on, and of course getting on the shortlist for the Commonwealth First Book author's award.

NS: It seems to me that you have really broken strides where writing is concerned, especially in Ghana. At the moment, I cannot think of any other young Ghanaian writer (except maybe one other person) who has published a book to fairly international acclaim. I think that puts you in a really strong leadership position where women and the arts are concerned. How do you feel about being in this position?

AHA: I am going to answer this indirectly as I do everything. I went to a talk yesterday and it was about Sekou Sundiata who was this poet, activist, writer, performer and artist. And I think one of the things he said, or that came up in discussion, was that *"a real leader produces other leaders, not followers"* so I am really excited to be in a position like this because it's so lonely. I don't know how the Ama Ata Aidoo and the Ayi Kwei Armahs who are the Ghanaian pioneers in writing feel, but I want to have that community of writers. If I am the one who is going to start it for this generation, I would be happy to have a lot of people who are willing to become leaders in this field as well.

So I know you said that there aren't many new writers, but I think there is a new crop of writers. Boakyewaa Glover released a book, Nana Brew Hammond is also Ghanaian; she is releasing her book next week and we are going to be doing some readings together. There are a few Ghanaian men who are also doing their thing; I have to shout them out. I think the lack of Ghanaian writers is also a symptom of our society. I have a close family member who at one point in time told me to find a real job when I started writing. Her comment didn't discourage me; I think it's not her fault, it's more about society's perception of what is viewed as important. For a long time writing hasn't taken a front row and I guess professions that are important to Ghana are flourishing... so a lot of people don't think writing would get you anywhere. Conversely, I think it does, writers have always played important roles, as scribes and voices of the people, as a connection between God and the people. I think people are beginning to realise that now, and at least the young people who are beginning to read stories give me feedback and say "*I'm impressed you can do this, I want to do the same.*"

NS: Do you think male writers tend to have it easier, in the sense that they are the ones who get the publishing deals; they are the ones who get signed? What are your thoughts?

AHA: I don't know, I think African writers in general don't have it as easy as other writers do. Ideally, we should be publishing our own books on the continent but there aren't that many publishing houses, so I can't say that it is a male/female thing per se. I think it's more of an African writing problem and if we don't write and publish our own stories, whom are we expecting to do so? If we keep importing things, there is always going to be that 'fetishisation' of what African literature is and what Africa is; an exotic place where war happens and disease ravages populations and it's just going to keep going on until we publish ourselves... There are some positive stories,

for example, a Senegalese publisher, Per Ankh, published my book in Senegal. There is the Cassava Republic Press in Nigeria which is doing big things. South Africa has a flourishing publishing industry and I think Kenya does too. Ghana is lagging behind unfortunately. But there is Smartline publishers in Ghana and I think that they are going to publish an Ama Ata Aidoo book soon. I think the problem is that Africa should publish its own books.

NS: I know you're working on a collection of short stories. Can you give me an inkling of what it's about?

AHA: I am really excited about it. There has always been a north-south divide in the world. It exists in most countries. In the United States, there is a clear divide. So this collection looks at that, most of the stories are set in Ghana and luckily I come from a family that is half northern and half southern. So I have always had this in my blood; the feeling that there is a disconnect somewhere. A lot of my stories are looking at relationships between north and south. However, some of the stories have to do with the developing world and developed world as well, and always between men and women. It's that question of advantage and disadvantage, who has more and who doesn't. I guess that is as much as I would say. The stories are beginning to connect finally which is really exciting because I started out thinking, *"They're never going to come together, what am I doing?"* I love linked stories, I love reading stories where there is one character who is here and a hundred pages down the line you read his story. I am happy that I'm getting to that point. That is as much as I'm willing to say.

NS: Do you think writing can be a form of activism?

AHA: I think there are two camps of writers when it comes to that: there are people who think it's an art form so we should just write for art's sake and there are others who think writers should have a vision and a worldview, and that everything they write should align with that vision. I trained under a writer who is of the latter camp, Ayi Kwei Armah. When you read his books, he is all about Pan-Africanism and his books espouse a Pan-Africanist viewpoint. But then there are parts of me or maybe more than parts, 70% of me, which is more of an artist (I can call myself that now) who just wants to be in the art world. I don't know if it is symptomatic of being in today's world that just likes to look at its navel and do its little thing. Then again, once you produce an art form and once it is in the world, it is going to affect people whether you like it or not. It is going to elicit a reaction whether you like it or not. People are going to respond to it negatively or positively, so even if you don't go out of your own way to get your worldview out there, whatever it is you are doing, it's going to have an impact.

So I guess writing is a form of activism and, again, from the talk I went to yesterday, I guess this poet, Sekou Sundiata, had been trying to understand what it meant to be an American for a while and then 9/11 happened. So what he did was go around many university campuses, artist spaces, talking to people. He had this art form and it involved dance, poetry, music, play, performances, things like that, and it just sparked off this discussion. People were talking about what it meant to be a citizen of the world, what it meant to be responsible;

they linked it to the Healthcare Bill that America is currently grappling with. It's so interesting because this was an art form. I guess it just spawned all these little branches and somebody said, "*I feel like I am not an American, I hate to be an American*" and somebody else said, "*I am Asian but I am American...*" It was interesting how this little performance piece just sparked off a whole debate. I don't know if that is what he wanted when he set out to create this video, but that is what it did. So this is my long-winded way of saying, "*Yes, it is (a form of activism). It really is...*"

NS: As an artist, are there any particular issues that you feel you want to bring to the fore in your work?

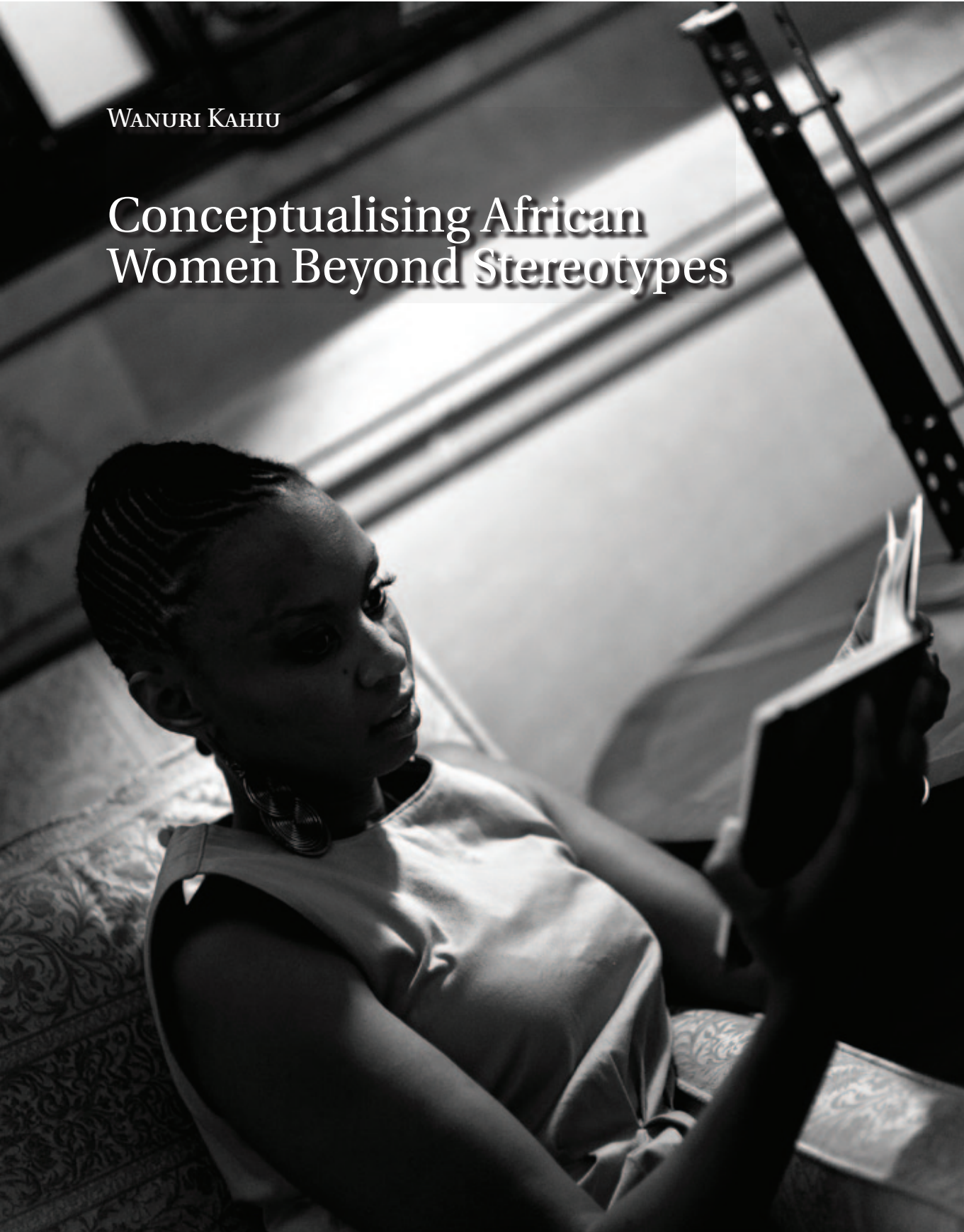
AHA: Definitely, women's issues. When I'm asked a question, I think first and foremost as a woman. If I do have to put on a label, I identify as being a woman first before anything else. So, women's issues and Africa which is always at the centre of everything. I mean there is my little Ghanaian world that I love, but I am trying to be more inclusive. Also health issues because I do have a science background and I find myself coming back to things like that, over and over again. Then, relationships between people – maybe that would even be the first thing before any other – young and old, man and woman, foreigner and local citizen, mother and daughter, father and children relationships. Yes, I think that is the core of what I like to write about. Relationships, and then from that you have all these other issues coming forward. Isn't that really what life is? Relationships?

NS: So what does the future hold for Ayesha?

AHA: Wow, tough question, I don't even know... I hope lots of good things, I really do. I hope to keep writing, it's so easy to get discouraged, so easy. I feel like writers, artists are so sensitive, I remember when I got my first bad review, I was depressed for a long time and

I felt like, maybe I was doing the wrong thing or maybe I was in the wrong field. I shouldn't be writing. So I hope to keep going no matter what happens. If you are pleasing everyone you're probably not doing the right thing, so I have to keep that in mind because I am a natural people pleaser.

I have ideas, I want to be able to do things for girls in Ghana, get them writing, and not just on the path of a writer, but just to improve literacy levels in Ghana because even my own education could have been a lot better than it was despite going to some of the best schools. So, at some point, I will probably get more politically active when it comes to education and issues like that. Baby steps!

A black and white photograph of a woman with braided hair, wearing a sleeveless top and large hoop earrings, sitting and reading a book. She is looking down at the pages. In the background, a violin is visible, leaning against a wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

WANURI KAHU

Conceptualising African Women Beyond Stereotypes

Wanuri Kahiu is an award-winning Kenyan filmmaker. Her film From a Whisper was nominated in 12 categories at the 5th African Movie Academy Awards, winning a total of five awards. Wanuri directed Pumzi, Kenya's first science fiction film, and produced a documentary on Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai for M-Net's Great Africans series.

ND: What inspired you to become a filmmaker?

WK: I walked into a TV studio when I was about 16 and realised that people *make* TV and films. It hadn't occurred to me before then. And being a bookworm and a telly addict, it seemed like a perfect fit.

ND: What influences you in your choice of subject matter and characters? Do say a bit more about From a Whisper and Pumzi, and why you decided to tell those stories?

WK: Stories differ depending on the source of funding, etc. *From a Whisper* was commissioned and *Pumzi* was a passion project. The similarities between both films are the lead characters. It's important to me to show the women of Africa extend beyond the stereotypes and pre-conceived ideas. *From a Whisper* was written to remember the people who passed away as a result of the bomb blast that happened in 1998 at the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. *Pumzi* was written as a reaction to our relationship with the environment.

ND: What attracted you to the genre of science fiction when telling the story of Pumzi?

WK: I wasn't attracted to the sci-fi genre. I wasn't a sci-fi fan. I just started writing a story about a girl set in the future, and *Pumzi* emerged. It was only later that I realised it was a genre piece.

ND: It seems to me that Pumzi is in the same family as George Orwell's novel 1984; a foreboding of the world we could be living in if we don't radically deal with the challenges of global warming and climate change.

WK: It can be a warning; it can also be seen as a hopeful story, a story that tells us that we all have the ability to be the mothers of Mother Nature. We just have to choose how we see the world and how we treat the environment.

ND: What are your thoughts on the current state of the African film industry?

WK: I am excited about the new generation of filmmakers who are portraying a modern Africa. It is so important that the stories are as varied and from as many different voices as possible, and now we are coming to a point where the filmmakers better understand the craft aesthetically and are creating films with a strong story and shoot Africa with pride and love.

ND: What have been your experiences as an African woman filmmaker in an industry that is male-dominated?

WK: I am part of a unique situation. The majority of filmmakers in Kenya are female. And when we work with our crew, because of the size of the industry, you work with the same family. So, once you nurture respect and keep working to defend it, then gender does not matter.

ND: I discovered your blog (<http://wanurikahiu.blogspot.com/>) where I found beautiful poetry, prose and photography... it appears that film-making is not your only creative outlet?

WK: I think of myself as a storyteller. Film is the avenue I choose to pursue as a career. However, in order to process how I feel, to think, to live – I write. It's the only way I can keep track of myself. The pictures I post are taken with my phone, usually when I travel. The blog was written more to express my innermost feelings rather than to present art to an audience. Sometimes it resonates with people, sometimes it doesn't. But without it, I am not myself.

ND: Do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, what has been your feminist journey?

WK: I champion women. I believe in equality and many times the superiority of women. I believe in their ability to nurture, serve, love; as well as their ability to fight, resist and contribute in all the dynamic ways they do. My main characters are women; different women of all races, nations, and places, so I guess I am a feminist.

ND: I recently read your moving tribute to Wangari Maathai in *New African Woman*, and I know she is one of your heroines. What did her life mean to you?

WK: She is my hero. She is my hero. She is my hero. She taught me to be constant. To find a niche and work endlessly in that niche to perfect it; to extend yourself to others with love, by being loving. She is the woman I rewrite often in many stories. Even with the very little time spent with her, I loved her like an aunt, a grandmother, a friend and as the woman who champions the cause that I feel is more important than anything else; our relationship with ourselves and with the environment.

ND: What's next for Wanuri?

WK: I'm working to adapt Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* – a fantasy, science fiction novel about a new world where a young mixed race girl is predicted to be the saviour that restores peace.

FEMINIST SPACES

Feminist spaces are integral to the women's movement. Feminist spaces are those places where women can openly state, "*We are Feminists. Full Stop,*"¹⁴ without the need for explanations, arguments or justifications. Feminist spaces can be in varied environments. Sometimes a feminist space is a unit within a large institution; other times, feminists reclaim their space by holding side meetings at international conferences. They can be informal spaces in informal settings created by women. In more recent times, African feminists have created spaces such as The African Feminist Forum¹⁵ which first came together in 2006, and the various national feminist forums that have been held in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda.

14 African Women's Development 2008. *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*. African Women's Development Fund: Accra

15 www.africanfeministforum.org

WOMAN, RISE!

(For my African feminist sisters)

Glide
the figure eight
across these Mnyarwanda hips
these Mswahili
 Mswazi
Ashanti
 Xhosa
ride
the slow flex
and turn
mould and
build
breeeeeaaaaaaaathe
and
transform
the rhythmic rebirth
of Africa's daughters

Mwalimu, Madiba
Lumumba, Nkrumah
asanteni sana!
but it is our turn now....

Incandescent butterfly woman
and river spirit
rise!
impala and ocean mother
rise!
story teller, basket weaver,
yam seller
rise!
mama, dada,
mother, sister
rise!

sister comrade sister fighter
sister lover sister friend
rise!

sister comrade sister fighter
sister lover sister friend
rise!

woman
rise!

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FLORENCE BUTEGWA

Developing Feminist Leadership



Florence Butegwa is a Ugandan who lives and works throughout the African continent. As a feminist lawyer and human rights activist, she works with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN) providing technical support to the African Union (AU) and women's rights networks.

NS: What have been your positive experiences of leadership?

FB: Leadership is not a one-person journey because as a leader, you work with other people to achieve goals and objectives. The best part of leadership, in my opinion, is teamwork and the knowledge that you are in pursuit of goals shared by others.

The second aspect of leadership, which I see as positive, is that leadership is challenging and therefore motivational. You have a team which depends on you, not necessarily for answers because in many cases people are experienced, but for creating the environment in which the team can work efficiently and effectively. Your team looks up to you to provide processes, forums and tools that enable the collective to harness the best from each other. This challenge of leadership enables you to think more deeply, to learn from previous experiences, to research, to question and to probe. If I didn't have those challenges of leadership I wouldn't know what I know now.

The other aspect of leadership that is really positive for me is the exposure – working with people you have never dreamt of working with, across cultures; working across different levels, and working with varied institutions. This type of leadership enables you to step out of a comfort zone and negotiate positions. For instance, when you are working in an international organisation, you are working with people from different religious, cultural and professional backgrounds. You don't know anything about their positions or their beliefs, but the positive part is the exposure you get to their respective cultures. You learn about commonalities and differences and how to work with and

across them. As a leader, you learn how to mediate and build alliances to further your work. It's a very exciting and enriching process. Sometimes you think the women that you work with in Africa are in such a terrible state, and then you meet women from other cultures who would like to be at least where you are. Sometimes they face the same scenarios but in different contexts.

NS: What does feminist leadership look like?

FB: What make leadership feminist are the ideologies and values. Most of these ideologies and values are captured in the "*Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*." Feminist leadership is leading in a way that does not undermine, that respects across sexuality, class and status. It acknowledges the rights of others and is empowering.

Feminist leaders appreciate and are aware of past, current and the very real danger of the continued subordination of women, so that in leadership you are always trying to reaffirm and strengthen women's agency.

Feminist leadership is value-based. It is not like a dress you put on or off; it permeates your personal life. It forces you to narrow the space between personal and public. When I run training sessions, I talk about double personalities; women who, in public, talk about equality but, in their personal lives, they do not practice and exemplify what they preach. I think that must be stressful – in one part of your life, you are assertive and in the other, you are not. Personally, I have tried not to live a double life, so if in public I am saying women's bodies are their own then this needs to be true in my own life. So, I have tried to teach my children that sexuality is normal. By the way, you don't start this conversation at puberty. My appreciation has been that my children have been my personal friends. For example, I have bathed with my children which has given me the opportunity to talk to them and say, "*This is your breast*," and to foster a sense of comfort with one's growing body. It was a chance, for instance, to talk to my daughter about menstrual periods.

NS: What kind of leadership advice would you give to a younger person?

FB: Leadership is teamwork. It can be scary and daunting if you think everything is on your shoulders. Feminist leadership is bringing out the best from your team and giving them the space to participate. Feminist leadership needs to be result-oriented. People understand more if they own the process.

As a younger person you need to be confident and trust, give credit to those who put you in the leadership position because they are rational beings. They are passing on the message that you can do it – you are a leader. Sustained leadership is earned through hard work, results, and empathising with the people you work with. This is not easy, even with the best of leadership there will be different opinions from the rest of the team. Hard work also helps in proving detractors wrong. Allow yourself to make mistakes, don't kill yourself, and don't go into depression because things don't work out. Talk with the others about what went wrong if you find yourself in such a situation.

NS: What inspires you?

FB: My inspiration really comes from women. Women I meet, women I read about, women who confront incredible odds and difficulties. For me, every woman who is able to overcome violence in the home, who is gang-raped and is still able to go on, is inspirational. When I hear of women in difficult situations, it motivates me to try, through my work, to change the system even if it's giving relief to one woman.

NS: What made you passionate about women's rights?

FB: I was teaching law and I had these students who were managers; it was a special programme for middle level managers. I was teaching about marriage and the law and explaining the differences between

popular perception and legal understanding. This one lady just got up and left sobbing. I thought she was ill. I followed her and found her in the parking lot, crying. When I asked her what the problem was she said if what I said in class was correct, then she is not married and she and her husband have two children together. When I was driving home I was thinking, here is an educated woman with a good job and she doesn't know something like that. So how about women in the villages? So that evening I started working on a research proposal to find out the level of legal awareness in the community. What I found out was interesting: women in the urban middle-class were worse off, mainly because the women in the rural areas did not know about the legal, but knew about the traditional laws, and how to seek redress whereas women in the urban areas did not know either. From then onwards, I started focusing on women's rights.

Another factor that made me passionate about women's rights was being a member of FIDA Uganda – the women lawyers' association; seeing lots of women in difficult situations, and conducting awareness campaigns in villages. That experience reinforced my passion for justice. I also learned that the issues we talked about happen in our homes, amongst our families and friends; that they can't leave you unconcerned.

**NS: What is your hope for the future where
African women's leadership is concerned?**

FB: I think women's leadership has grown – there are lots of women in leadership positions in different sections of society, but we need to distinguish between women's leadership and feminist leadership. Feminist leadership is what we need to develop, and I am glad that the African Feminist Forum and feminist mentoring programmes are helping to foster feminist leadership. We need to reinforce the kind of leaders that will transform African society into one that is conscious of, strives towards a more just and equitable society, irrespective of sex and gender; one that embraces changes in gender roles and women's

contributions to the development of their communities and nations. Feminist leaders also need to tackle other social evils, including fiscal irresponsibility and other forms of abuse of power. These are complex challenges but surmountable. We need to document: where we have the leaders one can pinpoint as feminist leaders, we need to understand how they are leading differently and draw lessons to inform leadership development and mentoring programmes. This documentation of feminist leadership needs to be disseminated in order to give more visibility to how feminists lead, and the impact of feminist leadership.

LEYMAH GBOWEE

Fighting for Peace



In October 2011, Leymah Gbowee was awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize alongside compatriot H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. Leymah is Executive Director of Women in Peace and Security Network (WIPSEN) and is widely credited with leading a movement of women who successfully mobilised for peace in Liberia. Her role in ending Liberia's civil war has been captured in Pray the Devil Back to Hell. She is the author of Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War.

NS: Who is Leymah Gbowee?

LG: How do I describe who Leymah is? One identity is a mother. This is one identity I really love, but I think I am a person who, from a really young age, has been looking for answers to life and this was reinforced during the early years of the Liberian war. I am a helper and a woman who loves herself. I am an activist at every level. Everything that touches a woman's life, a girl child's life and a child's life touches my being. I have a lot of compassion and a lot of energy. I find it difficult to relax. I was brought up in a home where I was the fourth child among five girls. I had a mother who was an only child and a father who is sympathetic to feminism. It was my father who resisted us being subjected to female genital mutilation. I come from a family of activists. My grandmother got divorced thrice and taught us that, if a husband brought in the charcoal or rice, you should be able to bring the salt. I will also describe myself as a politician; I have a head for politics.

**NS: I only became aware of your work through
*Pray the Devil back to Hell...***

LG: *(She smiles wryly.)* That's funny because that is not what I focus most on. What I pride myself on the most is starting WIPSEN Liberia

from scratch and bringing it to international standards, and through that, improving the lives of women and children. While I celebrate *Pray the Devil back to Hell*, I celebrate WIPSEN which was founded by Thelma Ekiyor, Ecoma Alaga and myself.

NS: What is WIPSEN about?

LG: The co-founder of WIPSEN, Thelma, was also the founder of a previous organisation, WIPNET, which focused on grassroots activism. What we realised was missing were the links between policy and grassroots activism. Some of these grassroots women who were very good mediators were not being called up to serve as mediators at an international level. Good initiatives like resolution 1325 were also not filtering down to the grassroots. WIPSEN however focuses on peace and security governance which allows us to fill in those gaps. So at the moment, for example, we are working with the army in Liberia to ensure that women's issues are reflected in policy.

NS: Where do you get your strength from?

LG: I get my strength from my faith in God. Pain has a way of moving people to two levels. When you are in pain, you either want revenge or you want the pain to go away. From the age of 17 until I turned 31, all I experienced were different kinds of pain. The situation went from bad to worse to ridiculous. It's almost like you are sinking and you can see no end. I experienced this personally and this was also the experience of other women in Liberia. This is how I started working to build peace in Liberia and I was grateful when the women said, "*We trust you, guide this process.*" Daytime was the time for action and night-time was when I would do my strategic thinking and planning. During the war, it was the pain that gave me the most energy. There is

a scene in *Pray the devil back to Hell* when we barricaded the men in the venue where the peace talks were being held. That was the time when I was the angriest; I wanted to grab an AK47. I started stripping like I had threatened to do.¹⁶

NS: How did you meet Abigail Disney, the producer of *Pray the Devil back to Hell*?

LG: That was a weird one. I had gone to the US to attend a university in Virginia; no one knew I was there. I got invited to speak at the 5th anniversary of 1325 and Swanee Hunt said to me, “*Someone is looking for you, Abby of Disney World.*” So Abby and I had a meeting and she asked me about the work I had done and told me that she wanted to explore this as a movie. We went back to Liberia and set up a meeting with key people. Her team interviewed lots of people and took tons of footage and images of film. When I saw the final piece, I thought they had done a good piece.

NS: What kinds of support do women working in peace-building need?

LG: One of the things I firmly believe in is giving the support that is needed. Never underestimate work anyone has done. Validate and show confidence in what women do. When we started it was a lonely road, we started our activism with \$10 from a woman’s handbag. For two months, we were fundraising. We had no support from NGOs¹⁷ and initially had a church help us with fundraising. When we went to Accra for the peace talks, we thought we would be there for three weeks but we ended up being there for twice that time. The AWDF gave us support which enabled us to stay in Accra, and women from northern Ghana gave us support.

16 The documentary *Pray the Devil back to Hell* explains that it is a taboo for African men to see the naked bodies of their Mothers so stripping in front of men is an act of defiance.

17 NGOs means Non-Governmental Organisations

They (women from northern Ghana) sent us five women who sat down and cried with us. When the press asked the women why they were there, they said, “*When our time comes, the Liberian women will help us.*” That’s the kind of support we need. Technical, financial and moral support – it makes you feel good. At the same time, we also heard that Nigerian women had presented a statement on our behalf. That’s what we need to do. When we hear something has happened, women all over Africa need to start mobilising.

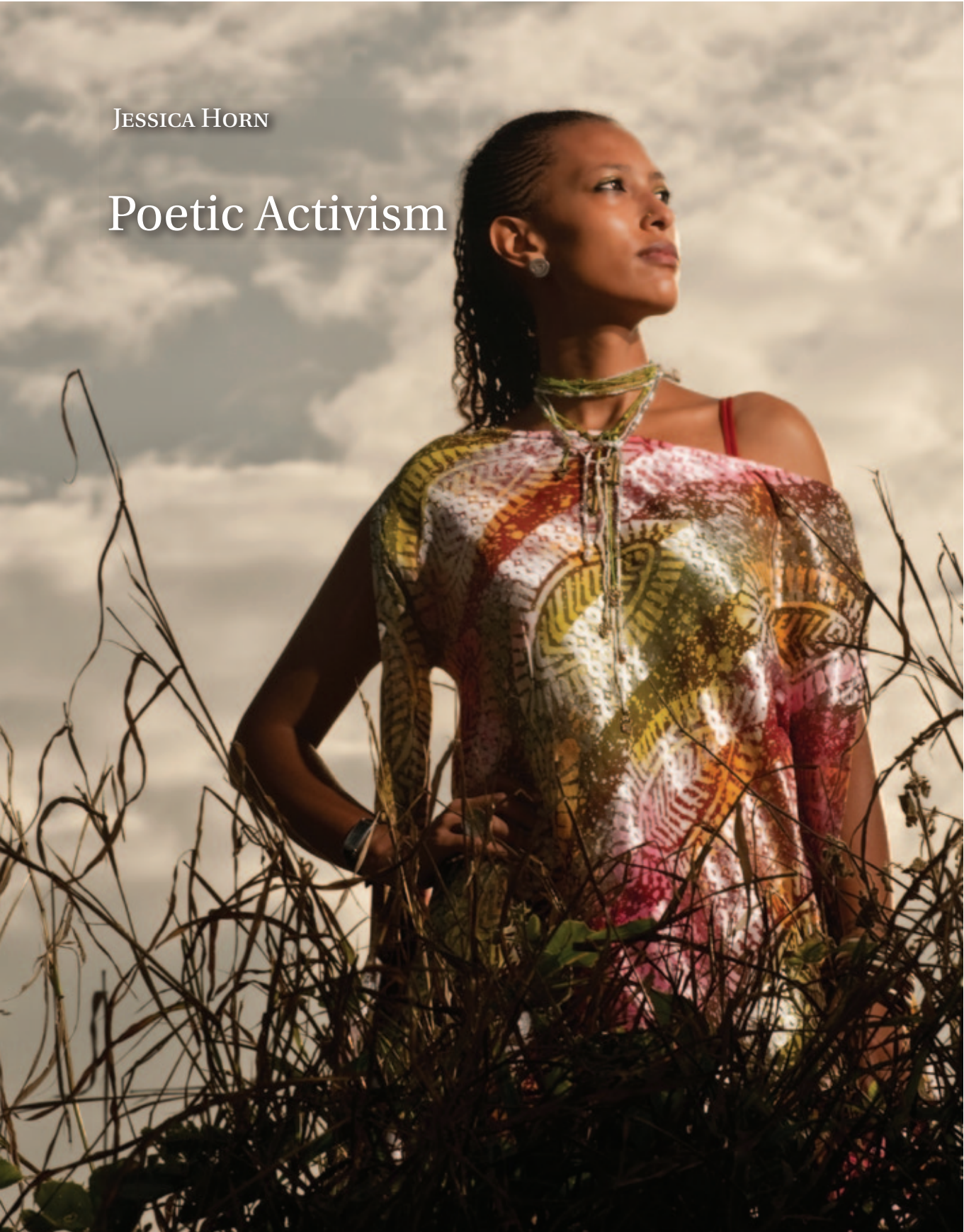
NS: How have you found the AFF so far?¹⁸

LG: I am rejuvenated in spaces like the AFF. Over the past year I have been mellow and quiet. Yesterday, during the trial (as part of the AFF a *Feminists on Trial* session was held, which explored through a mock trial critical issues that feminists need to address), I was jumping about and people said, “*This is the old Leymah.*” You are able to get rejuvenated when you are with women who share the same challenges.

18 Leymah Gbowee was interviewed at the 2nd African Feminist Forum which took place from the 17th-21st of September, 2008 in Kampala, Uganda

JESSICA HORN

Poetic Activism



Jessica Horn is a poet, women's rights activist and a consultant who works across Africa and globally. She is a member of the African Feminist Forum's Working Group, the author of poetry collection 'Speaking in Tongues' and co-editor of Voice, Power and Soul: Portraits of African Feminists.

NS: You're a poet, a women's rights activist and a consultant. How do you reconcile all the different things you do?

JH: In some respects it is just about being myself. From a young age I nurtured my passion for feminism and for working with and for women. I also have an absolute fascination with language and with words, and the possibility of art as a space for reflection, enjoyment and exploring my creativity. My engagement with women's rights certainly informs my poetry, and occasionally vice versa! Being a consultant (or a 'casual labourer' as good friend and fellow consultant Hope Chigudu would put it) is just a way of engaging in the labour market. I don't think it is foundational to my identity! In many African feminist spaces that I am engaged in, people really value and encourage creative expression. I think that is wonderful, and it also allows me to bring more of myself into my work than is sometimes possible in 'mainstream' workspaces. Still, on balance, the poet in me loses out when I am pressed for time. I need to address that!

NS: What inspires you?

JH: I am inspired by people's bravery, however small, in the face of violence and forces that attempt to silence them. In the course of my work I have had the opportunity to engage with a broad cross-section of people, from women who have mobilised for peace, to clergy who are challenging the abuse of religion, to women's rights activists who have taken on their governments undaunted, to women who have

said, “*I am HIV-positive, a lesbian, and an activist*” and have even been killed for daring to be themselves. I am humbled by their resilience and their commitment to stand up and say, “*Yes! We also have a right to life.*” Who am I not to respect this affirmation, and to join with them in a common struggle?

In spiritual terms, I have to say that I cannot live without art – without music, literature, visual art, and the endless possibilities of colour. There is something amazing about the process of creating art that fills me with a sense of possibility.

NS: What are the burning issues facing feminists on the continent today?

JH: African feminists are situated in the same complex terrain as any other Africans – how to deal with and confront corruption, transforming African economies so that they benefit more than a privileged few, keeping up the struggle to find ways of preventing and responding to HIV/AIDS, halting the rise of militarism, and confronting the daily violence that frames many African lives, in particular the lives of women and girls.

The world is finally heeding feminists’ warning calls that violence against women is a threat to human security. However, there is still a lot more work to do in challenging rape cultures – the idea that women ‘incite’ rape by the way they dress, that married women do not have the right to say “no”, or that it is acceptable for the police or courts to belittle women and girls who attempt to seek justice. And we also need to keep building on the slow progress made in affirming women and girls’ full rights to make positive choices and live safely and healthily in our own bodies.

One of the biggest threats to Africa’s future is the rise of religious fundamentalism, both Christian and Muslim. Fundamentalists are attempting to close down the possibility of debate and dialogue, and legitimising hate and sexism as ‘moral’ options. We need to keep up the work as feminists, in partnership with other progressive Africans,

in challenging this rising tide of close-minded, anti-equality and anti-thought discourse. Because once we allow our minds to be enslaved, we have lost the possibility of liberation.

NS: What's been your experience of feminist leadership?

JH: To me, leadership is not so much about what you say, or indeed the position you find yourself in or take up, but what you *do* to use your power responsibly and to put your ideas and skills in practice for collective good. I don't think that you can appoint yourself a leader. Leadership is a practice, and it is also something recognised by others.

I was facilitating a workshop for the Urgent Action Fund Africa last year bringing together women affected by conflict and HIV/AIDS from Liberia, Zimbabwe and Uganda. There was one Ugandan woman who kept shouting out phrases at every opportunity – *"Don't be lazy! A lot to do, a lot to do!"* She recounted how she had managed her way through poverty and her HIV status, sending her son to school in her own white blouse because she could not afford a school uniform, and forming a support group with other HIV-positive women. She was adamant that society should not judge her, or women like her, simply because of who they are or the choices that they have to make. There was something visionary about her, committed, and a little maverick. And the combination clearly made her a leader!

Another example of feminist leadership is Pregs Govender¹⁹, now a Human Rights Commissioner in South Africa. She has taken on the heart of power in her country, including the military-industrial complex, and has been willing to risk her own safety for the sake of speaking the truth. When I see how she moves through high-level political spaces and social movement spaces with her peaceful non-combative demeanour, it reaffirms that gentleness can triumph.

¹⁹ Pregs Govender is one of the inspirational African women leaders interviewed in this book

I think that true feminist leadership can come from anywhere, and it is not a question of being at the 'top' or 'bottom'. Because ultimately we are side by side in this struggle for women and girls' rights to be free and to live dignified lives.

NS: Who are your sheroes and why?

JH: I have come to realise that we are all imperfect. That said, there are certainly women who have done, and continue to do, amazing things that make them sheroes in my life.

My first shero has always been my mother. She took her children as her revolutionary project, and worked to teach us the power of love and open-heartedness. She raised us on a diet of complex political theory as a way to understand the world, which must have been what whetted my appetite for intellectual debate – much to the chagrin of my poor friends! As my mother once said, *"Take only what you believe to be life-enhancing from me."* I think those wise words should probably be applied to all sheroes we encounter!

In terms of my own development as a writer-activist, two sheroes stand out: African American feminists June Jordan and Sonia Sanchez. Both of them are mistresses of their craft, and have taught me as a reader the power of writing informed by political clarity. On that point, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie may well be making her way onto my sheroes list!

NS: What do you think needs to be done to reinvigorate movement building on the continent?

JH: I think that we, as feminists, and other progressive African activists need to reconnect with everyday people. We need to 'return to the source' to use a phrase from the Cape Verdean revolutionary Amílcar Cabral. While NGOs have proved to be an important piece of the puzzle in advancing justice and human rights and creating models of service delivery, there have also been downsides. The 'NGO-isation'

of our activism has had an effect on the degree to which we relate to a broad-based constituency and our collective actions for change *outside* of the workplace. As I always say, “*Change happens right now, here, between us.*” Movements are about all kinds of people uniting in common struggle. It has nothing to do with funding, or proposals, or workshops. It is about a collective agreement that inequality needs to change and a collective effort to make sure that happens! So our ‘work’ needs to keep stretching beyond the office and into all areas of our lives, and into creating and/or sustaining spaces open for a diversity of people to engage in thinking, through how we live our gendered lives and how we transform society so that women and girls can exercise their rights.

A portrait of Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro, a Black woman with a warm smile, wearing a vibrant, patterned headwrap in red, white, and blue. She is also wearing a blue patterned top with a red and black polka-dot collar and a silver necklace. The background is a rich, textured fabric with a geometric pattern in red, blue, and white. The text "DR. MUSIMBI KANYORO" is positioned in the upper left corner.

DR. MUSIMBI KANYORO

Protecting Feminist Spaces

Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro is President and CEO of the Global Fund for Women. Throughout her life, she has been a passionate advocate for the health, development and human rights of women, girls and minority groups. In 2011, the Women's Funding Network recognised Musimbi's contributions to philanthropy, women's funds and gender equity with the '2011 Changing the Face of Philanthropy Award'.

NS: For those who don't know you, how would you describe Musimbi Kanyoro?

MK: I am woman, wife, mother, sister, aunt, and recently, a proud grandmother. I am a human rights advocate, fundraiser, writer and leader. I am currently the CEO and president of the Global Fund for Women. We raise funds in the name of women's human rights and give grants to women-led organisations with the goal of building a strong women's movement for a just world.

I am the fourth child and also fourth daughter in a family of ten siblings of whom seven are girls. Our parents valued education and gave all ten of us equal opportunity to education. With an education, I have had lots of opportunities and privileges to participate in global leadership. I am a confident person and I think it all began by having a safe space at home, in school and in the communities where I grew up. For me, these safe spaces have most often been female-dominated.

Immediately after primary education, when I was just beginning to become a teen, I followed the pattern in our family. I joined a girls-only school. It was secure, competitive and assuring. The 'girls-only' space grew 'the girl' in me, inspired self-confidence, trust in other women and gave me the ability to embrace my whole being. I learned the value of holistic wellbeing which encompasses the physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual. The school taught us to put equal effort in sports, music, prayers and mathematics. We learned to value

philosophy, history, chemistry, religion and community service. We were graded for everything including saying “thank you” to people. This is my foundation. I am still very gutsy, earthy and heavenly. My faith is as important to me as my politics. I like to work hard and enjoy the hard work.

My undergraduate studies at Nairobi University awakened my political enzymes. It was the apartheid years in Southern Africa and organising activities round “free South Africa” that expanded my scope of the world. Competing with boys in class work and community participation prepared me for the real world. Having the confidence from high school, I was not afraid to stand for elections in student activities, but I soon learned the male students often wanted the female activists to be their clerks, taking notes and following up on things while they thought leadership was their role. I did not accept that and therefore I contested leadership roles, often finding myself humiliated, or elected but lonely. That was the first real encounter with gender discrimination.

Through a very politically charged process, I contested and was elected Secretary General for Nairobi University, United Nations Students’ Association. This began my international exposure, as there were so many meetings in other African countries and abroad. I became acquainted with the UN agenda and how the UN General Assembly conducts its deliberations. In running the Association, we imitated the UN General Assembly. We read books, debated issues, represented different countries and learned about those countries. I began to travel and meet world leaders. In Tanzania, I met Julius Nyerere whose political frame of *Ujamaa* won my heart because it had potential for bringing unity and services to places like Bware, the village where I was born. I was later to travel to India, Indonesia, the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, the UK and several other African countries before graduating from the University of Nairobi. All these exposures opened the whole world for me.

While I was pursuing graduate studies in the US, I decided that it was vital to be an ambassador for our continent. I found myself

irritated at how the media covered Africa and how what people said in private conversations carried negative or inferior connotations about Africa. I became deeply involved in reading and learning more about countries in Africa and seeking to know my continent better. I refused to join groups of people that included Africans who took pleasure in marginalising Africa. I still live in this space and I believe that this is strongest responsibility I have as an African working in the Diaspora. Living in perpetual “advocacy mode” is sometimes taxing. Sustainability depends on how authentic one lives in that space. There is no need to make false excuses, but one has to be well informed, honest and authentic. One of the most difficult challenges is to respond to charges about corruption in Africa. It is important to admit that there is corruption as elsewhere, but to also refuse to tolerate the implication that being African is synonymous with corruption.

NS: Where do you sit on the issue of whether men can be feminist and part of the African women's movement?

MK: The only justification for having a women's movement is that we lack gender equality and there are so many injustices done to women and we must change that. Gender as a concept refers to masculinities and femininities, women and men, the relations between them and the structural context that reinforces and creates these correlations. Gender refers to the social factors shaping the realities of women and girls and men and boys. We are never going to get to a good place on gender justices without a solution that takes men and women in the same direction.

Change-makers strive to bring everyone to the conversation and not just their allies. My aim in life is to get as many people as possible to recognise the humanity of women. Men are the other sex of humanity. They are family members, neighbours, friends, colleagues, and we want to enhance the good in these relationships.

Yet with much regret, men are also our oppressors and we organise to protect ourselves from men when they discriminate against us, act with violence and dehumanise us all. Men diminish women when they refuse to share equally resources, properties, decision-making, family and social responsibilities. They diminish us when they do not value our labour and our reproductive rights. They magnify motherhood, but minimise maternal mortality. We do not reject men, but we will not tolerate these abuses.

Men who believe in what we are doing will support us. Men know the suffering of women and are welcome to join us by changing their behaviour and becoming role models, and ultimately contributing to their own freedom and that of women.

Men who stand for justice are in a feminist space because justice is a feminist issue. For more than 30 years, my husband and I have been partners, equal in every way. All throughout my life as an African woman, men who understand justice support my feminist vision and contribute to it. I therefore believe that the African feminist movement needs men as partners for justice.

NS: Was there a turning point for you in deciding that you are a feminist?

MK: My introductory story above shows my incremental growth to self-awareness and affirmation of my feminine pride. Trained as an academic linguist, I thought my career path was to do academic research and to teach in university. In 1985, I faithfully returned to Kenya after completing graduate studies and a year at Harvard University as a visiting scholar. Nairobi was hosting the United Nations World Conference on Women. As I immersed myself in several host country activities, my consciousness about the “women’s agenda” grew in leaps and bounds. My prior feminist experience was academic, but now I was facing reality as experienced by my community.

“The Platform of Action”²⁰ that came out of the Nairobi conference made me an activist and my life changed because I learned so much from seeing nearly twenty thousand women gathered in one place and saying important things about women, and then telling everybody to do something about it. I abandoned my career. In 1988, I accepted an international position in Geneva, Switzerland to head the women’s department of the Lutheran World Federation, a development arm for Lutherans. As the first woman from Africa in this position, I was tasked with ensuring gender mainstreaming in all of the Federation’s services, advocacy, relief, diplomacy and theological programmes. During my ten-year term, I participated in five UN conferences of the 1990s, steered advocacy that resulted in a resolution requiring 40% presence of women on all governing bodies of the Federation and 40% of all the Federation resources to be spent in support of women. I witnessed the first ordination of women in churches, as varied and far away as Finland and Tanzania. I attended the installation of the first three women to become bishops in Lutheran churches. These successes were hard earned and they were the result of unwavering dedication and commitment from many women all over the world.

Many secular feminists are often not aware of women whose feminist activism is rooted in their faith affiliations. For example, in my opinion, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has been the most powerful group of feminists addressing African women’s issues where it matters most. How can you address issues affecting women in Africa without addressing their religious and cultural orientations?

In 1997, I was appointed the first woman from a non-Western country to lead the World YWCA. The ten years I spent as the General Secretary at the World YWCA gave me the opportunity to be completely immersed in a women-only space. For this giant organisation, the “W” makes a difference. Women have sustained this movement as a women-only space for more than 150 years. The YWCAs

20 To learn more about the 1985 World Conference on Women please visit http://www.5wwc.org/conference_background/1985_WCW.html

exemplify the essence of women's organising, leadership, activism, service delivery, and even spirituality. When women come together with a shared commitment, the agenda supersedes their differences. As women's spaces, the YWCAs and Girl Guides have depth and credibility that is unchallenged because they have crested the waves of time and are still relevant today. They are sustainable because they are locally grounded.

For me, I have never found it compelling to label myself as a feminist. However, I do not apologise for what I do in the feminist political frame and when people call me a feminist I wear the label with pride, because it means that they notice my commitment to gender justice. I know that naming is important, but I believe that actions are superior to the label. As they say, a rose is a rose even if you were to name it something else, or the taste of the pudding is in the pudding.

Feminists are my friends who feed my ego, sing the chorus with me, pick me up when I am down, challenge me when I stray too far from the homestead and continually provide a well of knowledge and experience. But feminists are not my priority for change. What keeps me awake at night are not the "converts". My priorities are the men and women who are not aware that they can do something to bring justice to women. It is the women who do not feel as safe as me to identify with the label of feminism. I want to be accessible to these audiences and I do not want my label to come between us. For three decades I have worked with millions of women under different situations and I know that the label "feminism" can build and it can also destroy. I am older, wiser, pragmatic and happy to manage my life this way so that I can do my work as a CEO and a leader. I have enough power to leverage without a label.

NS: How did your association with the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) begin?

MK: It began with meeting Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, the co-founder of the AWDF, when she was with Akina Mama wa Afrika. I saw its birth because of the space where I was in the women's movement then. Both World YWCA where I worked and ISIS-WICCE where I was chair of the Board cheered the birth of the AWDF. I have since been in many spaces with the AWDF including attending convenings. I was honoured by the AWDF with an award as "a woman of substance."

NS: I first heard about you in connection with the AWDF's 13 Campaign because you conceptualised the '13 Campaign' as the brand name and fundraising strategy for our HIV/AIDS fund. How did that come about?

MK: We were at an AWDF meeting in Ghana and celebrating a \$1 million donation from the Nelson Mandela Fund to support the AWDF's grant-making in HIV and AIDS. The pandemic update from UNAIDS indicated that, for every ten men infected with HIV/AIDS, there were 13 women infected. That was disturbing and I wanted us to use that statistic to leverage the money above. I thought that if African women increased that fund, we could ask other donors to leverage our efforts. Knowing the disparity on our continent, I wanted to find a way to inspire African women to contribute in a way that would be accessible to large masses. So I asked a woman sitting next to me how much it cost to braid her hair. It cost her roughly about \$20, which meant that if each one of us gave up braiding our hair once, we could afford to give \$20. But the number 13 symbolised the rate of infection of African women, and seemed a better campaign slogan. So I suggested that we launch a campaign that would ask contribution of 13 dollars or the equivalent in the local currencies. Those who were better off could give more, like \$130, and if they are still better off to give \$1300. So I began by pledging \$1300 and did some more promotion that brought in more money.

NS: At the moment, what do you think are the most important issues that women need to organise around?

MK: Political voice, gender-based violence, women's health and girls' education are top for me.

NS: What would you say has been the highlight for you working on women's rights issues?

MK: The biggest achievement right now is the politicisation of violence against women and its removal from the private into the public sphere. This politicisation has resulted in laws being changed, policies being put into place. It is still an issue that affects women everywhere, but at least it is not in the closet. I think this has been a big human rights opportunity, including being able not only to get rape criminalised in times of war, but also increasing sensitisation on the criminality of rape in general. Sexual violence on women and children is still appalling and we must work on this.

NS: I am aware that you have previously participated in the African Feminist Forum. So far, what are your thoughts on the AFF?

MK: This is our well. It is a picture of what the world will look like if we work together. But we cannot stay at the AFF space too long. The reality lies elsewhere and we must go there.

I hope that, even amongst us, there are people who will get out of this space and continue audaciously speaking out because our continent requires our voices, but even more than our voices, it requires a lot more action to keep women alive. It's not going to be easy, it's going to be tough and the louder our voices are, the more we will be seen as dangerous women. It will be a very good thing to be seen as dangerous women. Whenever I make statements like this, I always

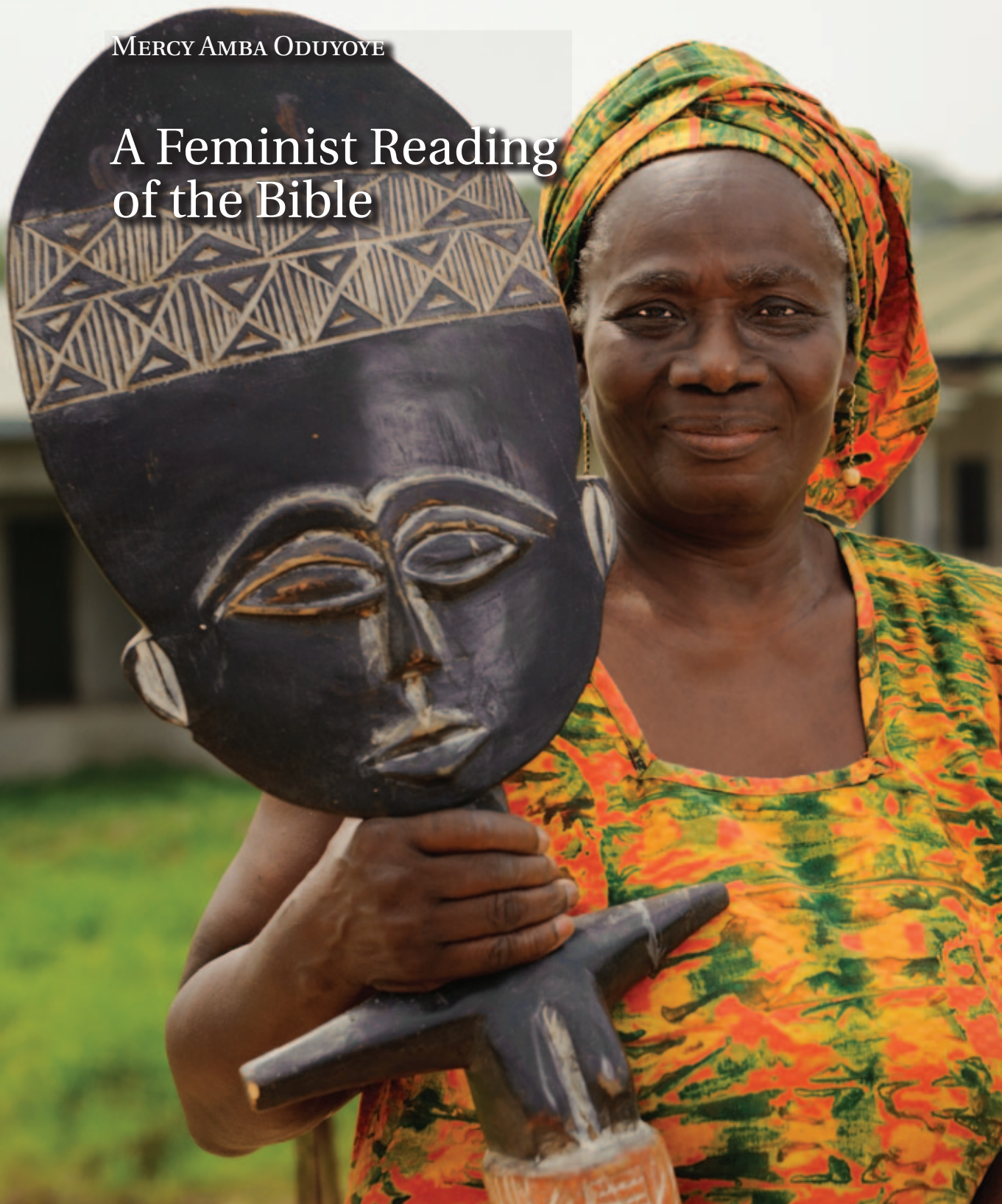
want to acknowledge that not all of us live in spaces that protect us. I know it is quite dangerous for some women and I would like to find ways of showing solidarity with women whose spaces are not safe.

NS: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

MK: I'm proud of the AWDF because it is founded by African women for African women. I am also pleased that Global Fund for Women helped grow the AWDF and now I know that I have a sister fund by me, so that we can strategise together on how best to fund women's solutions.

MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE

A Feminist Reading of the Bible



Mercy Amba Oduyoye is a Ghanaian theologian, and a founding member of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She is currently the director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana. She is the author of numerous books and publications including Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy.

Questions from the 'Facebook Palaver Hut':

*Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah (AWDF's Programme Officer for Fundraising & Communications) decided to post the following in her status on Facebook: "I am interviewing a Feminist Theologian tomorrow. What questions would you like me to ask her?" Within hours, Nana had at least ten questions so decided to base her interviews solely around the questions generated by 'the Facebook Palava Hut'. The initials next to the questions are initials of the individuals who submitted questions for Mercy Amba Oduyoye*²¹

DJ: How can you be a feminist when the Bible clearly requires that women obey their husbands?

MO: Jesus was a feminist. Where in the Bible does it say that women should obey their husbands, and is that the most important question for feminists? No, it is one of those questions that spring up because everybody's head is full of marriage and obeying men. It's not in my vocabulary.

JA: How does one approach the Bible from a feminist perspective?

²¹ Facebook Palava Hut was the expression coined by Jessica Horn to describe the process of generating these questions via Facebook. Jessica is also one of the women interviewed and featured in this publication

When people hear the word feminist all kinds of images come to them. For me, the basic meaning of a feminist is someone who believes that women are human beings and you should treat any human being, young or old, man or woman, as a human being. So you ask me this question and I say, “*Why are you asking me this?*” I’m a human being, there’s another human being and the Bible is there. The issue is this: anything you read, you read from where you stand. You read from your own locus, you read from your own experience, you read from your own placement in life, so that the perspective from which I look at a story will not be the same as how you look at a story. The perspective from which a man will talk about polygamy in Africa is not the same as that of another woman. So, if I take a Bible story, I’m reading the whole thing with my mind on the fact that this is supposed to be a message from a God of love, compassion and of justice who wants human beings to behave like beings created in his own image. If I find a passage that doesn’t look like it has compassion, I ask myself, “*Who is writing this and why?*” The Bible is a historical book: every one of those books came from a particular culture, a particular period in time when they believed this, that and the other, and within the Bible itself, you have a critique of some of the things that we just quote out of context. So, when women start reading the Bible with the eyes of women, sometimes they find things very different from what they hear preached.

Let me just give you one example, the story of the widow’s mite. Usually you hear that story when people are raising funds and they say, “*Bring your widow’s mite.*” You go to the Bible and you try to find out how this came about. In the chapter before this story happens, Jesus had been talking to his disciples and he had been telling them, “*You know, the way these Pharisees and Sadducees, and all these big powerful people, the way they behave towards widows, how they cheat them out of their property and oppress these widows, this is not something that should be going on in society.*” That’s the kind of conversation Jesus was initiating with his disciples. The following chapter places them in the temple and they are sitting close to where people

place the collection. They are sitting there and Jesus is watching, GHS 10,000²², GHS 20,000, GHS 50,000 and then somebody comes in with two pesewas and Jesus says, *“You see, you see, what I was telling you yesterday? This widow, that is the only money she has left and she has put it in. She has put in more than anybody.”* That’s where the story ends, preachers pick this and they say, *“Kitwa bei enswa,”* (meaning ‘no amount is too little’ in Akan language) bring in your widow’s mite, but no one brings in their widow’s mite because that widow was bringing in her last two coins. If I were one of the disciples, after that temple service I would ask Jesus why that woman did that. My answer is that she had been brainwashed by the religious system to give, even if she had to borrow to give (which some people do). Nobody is asking, *“Now that this woman has given her last two coins, what is she going to eat?”* Yet this is a religion in which every other page says in the Hebrew section of the Bible (which we call the Old Testament), take care of the widows and orphans, take care of the widows and orphans. If anyone were taking care of this widow, would she have two cents left? Now that is what it means to read the Bible from a feminist perspective. You question, you imagine, you look at people’s lives, you look at your own life and then you say, *“What does this mean?”*

Now, believe it or not, I did this Bible study with a group here in Ghana, at the end of which three women walked with me, and they were so impressed and one of them said to me, *“Auntie Mercy, I have really been thinking... We haven’t been giving enough to the church.”* How do you think I felt? I felt like, *“Oh my God, I have wasted my time.”*

JA: Who is a feminist theologian?

MO: A feminist theologian is a woman who does her theology as someone who listens to the kind of God we’re talking about; the kind of God who loves and is compassionate, and who wants human beings to thrive.

²² GHS represents the Ghanaian currency which is ‘Ghana Cedis’ and ‘pesewas’.

A theologian is a theologian; you're not a theologian because you went to a Bible school or seminary. You're a theologian because you want to critically look at your religion and ask yourself, "*What is my religion doing in the community? What is my religion doing to me? What are the ethical principles coming out of this religion and are we doing it right?*" Theology is a huge subject with lots of branches, so most people who will call themselves feminist theologians are people with doctorates, quite a lot of them are professors just like the men are.

JH: There is a growing wave of African Christian clergy who are using the Bible to justify discrimination and hatred, and women's continued inequality. Does the Bible itself justify this, or is this just an abuse of the Bible for political ends?

MO: I think it's an abuse because the Bible is not a monolithic scheme. If you read the Bible from the perspective I have just been outlining, there is no way that you can stand somewhere and say, "*God wants women to be oppressed.*" It's not possible. The scripture is misquoted and it's used to justify anything. There are 66 books in the Bible and each one has its own history with links running through. Ancient theologians like Luther say the thread that goes through the Bible is the love of God, and any passage that doesn't make me feel like you have to honour another human being, deal with them as human beings, talk to them kindly, respect their humanity, any person who says the Bible justifies the oppression of women, is not talking like Christ would. They are simply using the Bible. Any religion can be used in that manner.

JH: Is there momentum amongst progressive African theologians to respond to this (the abuse of the Bible) and to support an agenda for equality as a Christian ethic?

MO: There are theologians, men and women, who are writing. We have a genre of theology that we call 'liberation theology'. We have some of them here in Ghana. There are Third World theologians, theologians from the global south whose main aim is to ensure that the Bible is used as a liberative text from God. Within this, we have The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who specifically target how women read the Bible and work with women. We started in 1989, and now I think we have over 100 books that are all over the place, so there are a lot of writings by women theologians and men theologians who are liberation theologians. The people who use charisma to make money from the name of Jesus, that category is quite separate from those who think the name of Jesus should empower us to respect humanity, to respect other persons, and to respect the integrity of creation. We are all loved. They said, "*God so loved the world.*" They didn't say, "*God so loved human beings,*" but the world. The whole world is in God's care and that is what we are trying to say and write all the time.

AW: Is there enough understanding and appreciation of the leading women in the Bible amongst African pastors? If not, what can be done to highlight the strong women portrayed?

MO: I have come to a point where I get bored with the women of the Bible. That is all that the men and women want to hear about – the women in the Bible. There are so many women in the Bible who don't even have names and their lives are as important as the rest. There are so many books on women in the Bible and you read through them and you can see the agenda of that person. There are women who pick these powerful women in the Bible for a particular agenda, to make everybody like them, but God doesn't make things uniform, God likes variety and that is why your colour and my colour are not exactly the same. So the women in the Bible who get picked very often, they

usually start with Deborah and Ruth. All those women are there as women in patriarchal societies and, in all our patriarchal societies, if you toe the line and behave properly then you are a good woman. That is why everybody hails Ruth, she's a lovely woman, loving her mother-in-law but that is it. She is no better than Orpah who was obedient, because the mother said "*stay back*" and she obeyed the mother. What has she done wrong? And because the story is Ruth's story, we hear Ruth but we don't hear Orpah, and we do not know what happened to Orpah because Orpah is not part of the Israelite story. Orpah is part of the Moabite story and it is the Israelites who are telling the story. So, always think that all these stories, they come from a people, so they tell it the way they experienced it. They don't go out to tell other people's experience.

Ghanaian women are really very funny. The last time somebody was talking about Ruth, I sat there and was thinking "*Oh my God, what is this?*" because the woman was saying "*Ey... and Ruth, the way she obeyed her mother-in-law, the way she lived with her mother-in-law, so her mother-in-law taught her how to...*" Naomi becomes a pimp as far as I am concerned. Ruth didn't say that she wants to be Boaz's wife. It was Naomi seeking her property, using Ruth and teaching Ruth what to do in that culture if you want a man to sleep with you. It is an older woman teaching a younger woman what to do, and depending on where you sit, you are happy or unhappy. Me, I am unhappy, because this whole thing is not about Ruth, this whole thing is about the patriarchal culture which insists that Naomi should have a man who will support her heritage. So what we need to look at is this patriarchal system that makes women use other women as pimps. I said this in a conference and, if I didn't have classmates, maybe I would have been lynched. Look! It is the mothers who say, "*Nanso aden* (meaning 'why' in the Akan language) *all of this time you are not married? You better get married...*" and they will give you to a man who already has four, five, six wives, because they want you to get married, so that they can have a grandchild, and be sure that you

are married. And then, when you go and get yourself nice and pregnant and you are not married, they turn round and say “*Ey... akwala boni*” (Hey, ‘naughty child’ in the Akan language). Who started it? It’s the older women who push the younger women to do what they are doing. If they are not always after them *na won wari?* (‘won’t you get married’ in the Akan language)? Why should she be married? We have made marriage a kind of idol that we sacrifice our daughters to. You know there is a story in the Old Testament, a god called Molech to whom the Jews, the ancient people, used to sacrifice their children, and the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is related to that because God was trying to tell the Jews, “*No, don’t do that. Don’t sacrifice your children!*” Marriage has become the new Molech in our lives, and we are sacrificing our girls to the idol of marriage.

AW: Which major religion, in your opinion, is more favourable to women and women’s rights?

MO: None of them is, none of them. I’m a Christian myself and when you talk about women in Africa, the response you get from men and women would be “in Africa, Christianity has helped to liberate women, because now women have been to school” and so on. But it is only last Sunday that the Anglican Church ordained three women as deacons. As recently as 2010 the ‘Holy Trinity Anglican Church’ is doing this (ordaining women). I am doing some archiving work and I see a letter from another Anglican friend of mine saying, “*Mercy I am enrolling; I know that the Bishops are not ready to ordain women but we will hang in there.*” All these years!

So I don’t want to compare the religions to say this one is better than that one; they are all patriarchal. They are all based on what men think religion is doing, and depending on who is managing the religion, the women come out a bit better here or worse there. In Ghana, the major religions are Islam, Christianity and traditional religions,

the African traditional religions. People used to say “*Ah, it’s much better because the women can own shrines, they are Akomfo (cultic functionaries)*” and so on. But it is this same traditional African religion that says menstruating women cannot do blah blah blah, and they exclude the women. Any reason to exclude the women is okay for a religion. So, for me, they are all the same. They are all the same because they are androcentric, they have a mentality that places men in power and that is not what God said in Genesis 1:26.

In Genesis 1:26, the affirmation there, that Jews, Christians, Muslims, should be telling the whole world is that God created the human being ‘Adam’ in God’s own image, male and female created, simultaneous creation of male and female. In the Hebrew language, Adam comes from the word ‘from the ground or the soil,’ *a-da-ma*, and what God is saying is, “*This is the being I took from the ground, from the soil, and then later on, it became a proper name for one person.*” God created human beings equal, men and women both in the divine image. That is what is most important and that all believers should know.

NS: Are you saying that the creation of Adam wasn’t necessarily gender-specific? It was a creation of a being?

MO: The story of creation that you have in Genesis 1 does not speak of a gendered being, it was a human being and it says “*male and female.*” Now, whether it was simultaneously out like this (*she stretches out both hands*), whoever was writing this story didn’t go into the details, but he says a human being was created. Male and female – that is the later way of writing this story. The one that comes in Genesis 2 or 3, the later one that says the woman is taken from the ribs is the more primitive story, and it is a story that is saying women came out of men. The only way I can imagine that is the birth envy of the men who were writing this story, because it is men who come out of women. *Abi?* (‘Isn’t it?’ in Nigerian Pidgin English).

So, in order to underline the primacy of man you get this story about the rib. Even if there is scientific evidence showing that all men have one rib that is missing, I don't care. It is not the man who created Eve. What did he do? He was asleep. Also when people pick this story to tell, they don't talk so much about the astonishment of Adam himself, because he took a look and said, "*Wow this is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.*" He was so happy to see another being that is like him and not like the elephant, worms and the ants. So, any man worth his salt, when he sees a woman, should say, "*Wow here is a human being,*" and not start trampling on her as if she is an ant. So, that is what I do by reading the Bible from a woman's perspective.

AW: Some people argue that feminism is not compatible with Christianity because feminism argues against God's ordained roles for men and women, for instance, men are the head of the house and women the help mate. Do you agree?

MO: I think people don't understand what Christianity is about. They think Christianity is the oppression of women and Christianity is not the oppression of women. If you want to see what Christianity does with women, go back and read your New Testament and see how Jesus treats women. That is what it is about. And anybody, all the churches, and whoever is not treating women the way Jesus treated women; it is the person who is not a Christian and not the feminists who are pointing to these stories. Christianity doesn't talk about tyranny: Christianity is talking about relationships, good, loving relationships.

So, if anybody is to leave the church, it is all the people who are not feminists. They are the ones who should leave the church, because they don't think women are human beings and God created women as human beings.

AW: Do you think that the perception of women as seductresses and women as the cause of men to sin is really the opinion of God or is it man-proposed?

MO: The Bible is not a book, in which God says you should do this, and then you go and do this or God says you should do that, and then you go and do that. That is not the way the Bible is written. Anything to do with seduction, I don't blame women; I just blame the women who have told the men that they have no self-control. The men and the women who have brought up our menfolk to believe that they cannot control their sexuality, they are the people to be blamed.

Let's look at the story of Bathsheba, Bathsheba's standing in her house and having her bath. Did she ask David to seduce her? She was in her house! All the stories in the Bible about women and sexual relations, they all have particular stories and particular context around them. Even this famous story of the woman caught in adultery, every time any preacher gets up to that pulpit to talk about sin, that is the only one they remember to talk about! And to everybody who does I say, "*Yes, here is another one of those people.*" Was she committing the adultery by herself? That is why Jesus was asking: "*Where is the man? Or where are the men?*" So, he (Jesus) was very balanced in all these things. If it is a sin, you don't commit adultery by yourself, so go and bring the man, then we can talk.

Take the story of the Samaritan woman; ah, people love that one, "*Jesus said you have had five husbands and the one you are living with now is not even your husband*" ... Did anybody ask why she has had five husbands? If she sits in a marriage and she is beaten and she gets out, or she is shoeless and she gets out, my lawyer friends call it '*Aware kankan*' ('a marriage that stinks' in Akan language). She has that many husbands because they were not proper husbands, and

she wasn't going to sit there because the patriarchal system says she should be married, so she got out. Now, if I pick this text to preach on I would ask that question. Then, I would say, that I can imagine why she got out of five marriages. But, in any case, if the one that she is with now is not her husband, we should go and call that man too to find out why the two aren't married but living together. Let us put the blame on both of them, so even this issue of making women the ones who make men sin, it's another patriarchal construct.

Last week, I went to a meeting of the Christian Council and a statement was made, *"Oh, you know, see the number of men who have come to this meeting, this is very encouraging. Usually at the Christian Council meetings, the men don't come. Now women, we should encourage the men, we should encourage the men."* Why should it be the woman's responsibility to encourage the men to do what is right, to put their heads into church projects? The women were doing this out of their own free will. So, they are putting the blame for the men not doing what they should do on the women and they are asking the women to make the men do what they should do. Why? Is that fair? Talk to the men and let them do what they need to do. When this man said there are so many men here, (I wasn't supposed to be at the meeting, so I didn't say anything) but the reason for that is, if you go for a church meeting or an executive, a formal administrative meeting, you will find 80-90% men, they run the show. If you go to a programme where the church is going to visit the borstal institute or the church is going to do some other charitable project, who will you find there? The women.

So the everyday Christian living, the women will do, but when it comes to the administration of the Christian institution, that is where you will find the men. Because when they send a delegate to the Christian Council meeting they will send a man – they wouldn't send a woman, so that is where we are.

AW: Recently, one Iranian Imam controversially said that the recent earthquake experienced in their country was a result of female promiscuity. He believes if women were to cover up and not be sexually active, it wouldn't cause men to sin, thus causing God to be angry and punishing them with a natural disaster. The only way, they say, to avoid God's punishment is to be sin-free. Please comment.

MO: No, it is the same thing as blaming the victims and making the victims responsible for righting the wrongs. If God were to punish with earthquakes, he should be punishing those who make the armaments, those who are seeking particular political situations, those who are fighting over oil and therefore keep that country perpetually under war. Those are the people God should be punishing and ask me how many women are in that category?

And the Iranian women are promiscuous by themselves? Are they all lesbians?

It's with men. Are you familiar with the proverb that says, translated "Whilst you are talking to the fish also talk to the cat" (translated from the Akan language, "*Wooto agyinamoa fo no na wooto momoni nso fo*")? That is what it is, you have to tell both parties, especially in the case of young women and young men; you are both responsible for what happens to your bodies – you respect yourself and you respect the other person. So that whatever is happening to you is mutual, in which case, if there is punishment from God, it would be both of you who are causing God to be angry and not just the woman.

NAOA: Do you think there's a conflict between modern feminism and traditional Christianity?

MO: I don't know how to respond to that because Christianity itself is not again a monolithic religion so you would have to particularise it

for one to be able to answer that. I think basically what this person is saying is in the previous question that sounded like if you are a feminist, you can't be a Christian and vice versa.

So my answer is, I don't see what conflict there is, if traditional Christianity is Christ-like then it should embrace feminists who are also struggling to be Christ-like.

PA: How did and who replaced the both male and female, omnipotent creator god *Ataa Naa* (Ataa is a male Ga name and Naa is a female Ga name) under whom a woman's name only changed to accommodate *her* children e.g. Kofi Maame with a misogynistic doctrine that goes as far as branding an individual with her husband's name e.g. Mrs. Tetteh.

MO: The Ataa Naa Nyɔmo (Atta Naa God) comes from the Ga culture. You can't generalise it to say that all religions see God as male and female together. If anything, what we should be saying is that God is a spirit and a spirit does not have a body, so a spirit will not have genitals. So God is God. The human perception that God is male is borne out of human beings looking at our human culture and modelling God after our image, and not the other way round. God's image is a God of creativity, compassion, love, and God wants human beings to be creative, compassionate and loving.

We switch that and we turn that into a physical imaging and that is what gives us the problem of God being male or female. There are several religions that have a lot of women who are deities, deities that are in the form of women. So it is we human beings making problems for ourselves, trying to find out whether God is male or female, and since most of the people telling the stories are men, they prefer to say that God is a man.

The issue of the naming for me has always been very irritating; because in our Akan culture and in most of our Ghanaian cultures

whilst you are a baby, you are given a family name, and the name you are given on the eighth day is the name they will bury you with. The only thing is that since there are too many people called Amba, when you say Amba, they will ask, “which *Amba*?” Then, they would say Kofi Maame or Abena Maame (Abena’s Mother). These are qualifying words like Papa Asumasi yire (the wife of Mr. X). They are not names.

It’s the British patriarchal family system that brought us surnames. We didn’t have surnames, and people were named after personalities in their families, mostly personalities in the father’s family, some from the mother’s family, and some from even just friends.

Men can keep the name they were given on the eighth day until they die whereas women cannot keep their name until they die, because we followed the Western system that colonialism brought, and because it suits the men, we have carried it through, and because the women want to please the men, we continue to carry it through.

I was in Geneva when the Swiss law was passed that says, when a woman gets married she is free to take her husband’s name or not to take it. I had a young friend who was getting married. This is a family of five girls, and the two brothers they had, had both died. This girl said, “*I will not let my father’s name die so I will not change my name when I get married.*” Her husband was a play mate when they were young and he said he had no problem but the mother-in-law insisted that she should take her husband’s name. So, I went and spoke to the mother-in-law and told her, “*the Swiss have made a law so leave these young people to take their own decision,*” and she said, “*No, no, no ... when I changed...*” Then I said, “*this is the story of the tail-less fox, because your tail is cut you want everybody else’s tail to be cut.*”

Why should people ask me, “*Are you Ghanaian?*” when they can’t even recognise that this is not a Nigerian accent? It is so irritating. I never opted to change my name. I went to change my passport to get my husband’s name written in my passport because that is what the Swiss wanted. When I went to collect my passport, the staff at the passport office had changed my old passport and put a passport with

my husband's name in it. I was flying that evening. If I didn't have a flight that evening I would have abandoned the passport and would have waited because I think it is very unfair.

Justice Annie Baeta Jiagge was a high court Judge who was previously known as Annie Baeta. She is the one who explained this to us, "*Marriage is the civil death of a woman.*" You get married and you change your name from Yamoah to Oduyoye, and everybody forgets that you were once upon a time Yamoah, and all that you did before, people forget. In the meantime, this married name that you have, what contribution did the man who bears it make towards you becoming who you are? If it is my father's name or my grandfather's name, (because my real name is my grandfather's name) fine, their DNA is in my blood. So why all this hullabaloo? And when I have spoken like this, the men that I spoke to said, "*Aunty Mercy, so are you saying that our wives should not bear our names*" and I told them, "*it's up to your wives, it is their choice*". If she is comfortable in saying that she has burnt her past and all her life is in your hands, that's her choice. For me its fine, anything that's your choice is fine.

MARY WANDIA

Women's Transformational Leadership



Mary Wandia has over 12 years' experience in policy research, advocacy, campaigns, human rights and civil society coalition-building at the regional and international levels. She works for the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA) as Regional Programme Officer, East Africa Community (EAC)/AfriMAP. Prior to joining OSIEA, she worked as Pan-Africa Gender Justice Lead, Oxfam GB Pan-Africa Programme.

NS: How did you get involved in working on issues of women's rights and social justice?

MW: My feminist journey started at the African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET) in 1999 where I worked as a programme officer leading on advocacy around gender mainstreaming in the transition from the Organisation of African Unity to the African Union (AU), as well as trade and financing for development. Working in a feminist organisation marked the start of a journey of learning how patriarchy had controlled my life and that of the community that surrounded me all my life. It is that background that motivates and sustains my struggle to ensure that I contribute to women's empowerment, and to reject stereotypes that try to minimise the status of women and girls.

NS: What drives you to continue doing the work you do?

MW: The unfinished business of securing women's human rights. We have made a few changes in transforming the unequal power relations between men and women, but until every woman enjoys her rights, we are not done. The desire to contribute to that transformation that will see the empowerment of women, the end of patriarchy, is what drives me every day.

NS: In your opinion what are the key issues facing African women on the continent today?

MW: Our key issue is patriarchy – the system that privileges men and subordinates and oppresses women through religion, culture, tradition, attitude, etc. Patriarchy is normalised in our people and institutions. It manifests itself in a lack of, or a limited number of women in politics and decision-making, increases religious and cultural fundamentalism, results in violence against women, both in peace time and in conflict, that has remained unaddressed, whilst providing a fertile ground for HIV and AIDS.

NS: For you, what are some of the ways forward in dealing with the above issues?

MW: We need to transform our society. To transform our society, we need to re-politicise our struggle for women's rights. The starting point is transforming leadership to ensure that it respects key values that are critical in ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment. We need leadership that is inclusive, respects human rights, leadership that is non-hierarchical and focused on achieving sustainable development for all.

To get to that kind of leadership, we need to build strong movements with skills and values in transformative leadership. We need to strengthen our organisations and also to nurture future generations of feminist leaders. Most importantly, as individuals, we need to live up to the values of feminist transformative leadership. Critical to all these will be creating safe spaces for us to celebrate our achievements, reflect on our failures and share skills and strategies to dismantle patriarchy.

NS: What have been your key leadership lessons?

MW: I have learnt that leadership goes beyond numbers of women in politics and decision-making. We need to look at the values informing our leadership in order to transform our society into a safe place for all. We need feminist transformative leadership. Feminist transformative leadership seeks to change structures, processes and systems, to guarantee social justice, equality and equitable distribution of resources. It seeks to radically alter the existing power imbalances that permeate each of our social, economic and political institutions. We need to infuse this kind of leadership in our practice at individual, institutional and movement levels. This should be our focus in the next decade.

NS: Any thoughts on how solidarity amongst African women can be further strengthened especially in times of great need?

MW: We need to embrace all women's human rights without isolating certain groups based on patriarchal biases. We need to extend our solidarity beyond our comfort zones to frontiers of rights that we have neglected or found too 'explosive'. We need to recognise movements and rights of all women including sex workers, women living with HIV and AIDS and lesbian women. They are part of our movement, but we have left them and their rights on the margins and that marginalises our feminist struggle. We need to remind ourselves that women's rights are human rights and re-dedicate ourselves to the struggle for rights of all women.

NS: How can women be more involved in peace processes?

MW: Women are involved in peace processes particularly at the community level. However, they are excluded or made invisible in official peace processes. This is in spite of the many protocols and resolutions on women, peace and security, that have been adopted by the UN and the African Union. These protocols and resolutions all affirm the principle of involving women in peace processes, but this has hardly been translated into practice, leaving official peace processes to warring groups. It is time to demand accountability from the institutions and their members to implement their commitments and ensure that every peace process includes women. Women's involvement in peace processes is not only a right but also a pre-condition for sustainable peace. We have to be involved in setting up principles for establishment of mediation teams and we need to create a database of women mediators/peace envoys that the AU and UN can call upon as the need arises.

NS: How do the ordinary women benefit from regional protocols like the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa?

MW: The AU Protocol is Africa's Women's Bill of Rights. It sets out a framework for safe-guarding and protecting women's rights. It goes even further to frontiers of rights that have remained unaddressed, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights including abortion and female genital mutilation in Africa. It benefits ordinary women by providing them with a tool to demand accountability from their states on women's rights. If implemented fully, it has potential to transform unequal relations between men and women in our continent by guaranteeing women their human rights.

NS: How do you rejuvenate and re-energise yourself?

MW: When my batteries run low, a massage, dancing and exercise come in handy. To rejuvenate my mind, I read books by various feminist writers in and outside the continent. This is always inspiring and helps me to feel part of the wider struggle against women's oppression. The most energising of all is the privilege of being a member of the African Feminist Forum. The Forum provides me with opportunities to meet and hangout with feminists across Africa and to share and learn from their work.

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WOMEN LEADING AFRICA

Conversations with inspirational African women

VOLUME 1: Politics, the Arts and Feminist Spaces

“We need to document where we have leaders one can pinpoint as feminist leaders to see how differently they lead. This documentation of feminist leadership needs to be disseminated in order to give more visibility to how feminists lead and the impact of feminist leadership.”

Florence Butegwa
Feminist Lawyer and Human Rights Activist

“Patriarchy depends on our subordination; subordination is how patriarchy succeeds. Insubordination is being insubordinate to the power of hate, greed and fear, to patriarchal authority and systems be they economic, political or social”

Pregaluxmi Govender
Deputy Chair Person, South African Human Rights Commission

“From the age of 17 till I turned 31 all I saw was different versions of pain. The situation went from bad to worse to ridiculous. It’s almost like you are sinking and you can see no end. I experienced this personally and this was also the experience of other women in Liberia. This is how I started working to build peace in Liberia and I was grateful when the women said “we trust you, guide this process”

Leymah Roberta Gbowee
2011 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

‘Women Leading Africa: Conversations with Inspirational African women’ is a collection of interviews with women leaders from Eastern, Western and Southern Africa. In this collection, these leaders share their inspiration, thoughts and experiences on feminism, politics, peace building, leadership and the Arts.

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