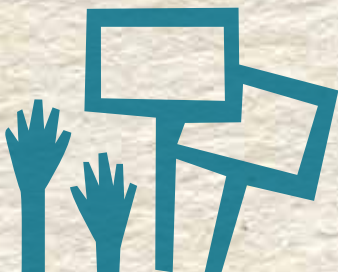


Feminist Organising for Women's Human Rights in Africa: Current and Emerging Issues



Background paper
for the AWDF's
Women's Human Rights
Convening
30–31 October 2013
Nairobi, Kenya



By Everjoice J Win

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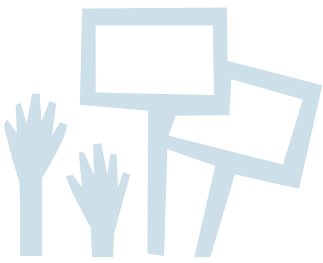
African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)
78 Ambassadorial Enclave
East Legon, Accra, Ghana.
www.awdf.org

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Contents

Introduction and background	2
The Africa we love	3
Growth without human rights and development	5
Human rights have gone out of fashion	7
The future has returned to bite us: rural women's rights	9
Women in the city	10
The unfinished business of heterosexuality	11
Jesus' deputies, hidden power and the erosion of secular spaces	13
Women's political participation – investing where power really lies	15
How we organise	16
Conclusions	18



Introduction and background

There have been some significant gains for women in Africa over the past 15 to 20 years. Women are taking positions of leadership in increasing numbers in political, economic, legal and social fields. In Rwanda, women constitute 64% in parliament, ranking it as the leading nation globally for representation by women in a legislature. In 2005, Africa witnessed the first woman president with the election of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. In 2011, we had the second woman president, President Joyce Banda. There is legislation in countries such as Ghana, Kenya and South Africa against domestic and other forms of gender based violence. In 2010, the African Union (AU), launched the Decade for Women.

While these achievements are welcome, there is still a big deficit in implementation of key international and national policies and laws. Thirty years after the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), many girls and women still do not have equal opportunities to realise their rights as recognised in law.

AWDF's strategic convening on women's human rights

In the last ten years, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) has made huge investments in promoting women's human rights (WHR) and development across the continent. Its investment in grants awarded to women's rights organisations working on the continent between 2001 and 2014 was US\$ 26 756 974.

During this decade, AWDF provided the much needed autonomous resource base to ensure that the needs, aspirations and contributions of African women were recognised, supported and valued. In 2010, AWDF conducted an external review of her work over 10 years. This review formed the basis of AWDF's 2011–2015 strategic plan (SPIII). In SPIII, grant making thematic areas were revised to address emerging issues as well as give greater focus, meaning and direction to grant making programmes.

An external evaluation of the WHR thematic area of AWDF's work was conducted in early 2013. The evaluation report:

- affirmed AWDF as filling a critical gap in addressing women's rights issues across the continent
- recommended ways to consolidate gains made
- confirmed AWDF's focus on grant making in this area as broad enough to support critical areas of women's human rights.

It is against this background that AWDF convened a two day discussion on the state of women's human rights in Africa. This convening was held on 30 and 31 October 2013. The goal was to provide stakeholders; including donors, grantees, academics and African women policy makers; with a unique space to deliberate current WHR issues so that they could (a) identify strategic ways to intervene, and (b) work out how best to maximise impact on the ground.

Specific objectives were to:

- understand the context in which WHR organisations operate on policy advocacy work in the region
- identify critical issues
- map out strategies to maximise impact.

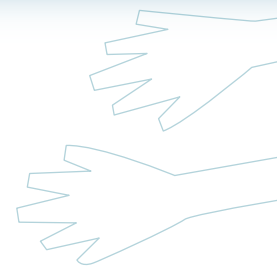
The AWDF commissioned this paper to frame discussion on the above objectives.

Limitations and a cautionary note about this paper

This paper does not claim to provide the definitive picture of WHR across the 53 countries in Africa. There are glaring gaps with regards to North Africa. In addition, the author owns all the perspectives in this paper as her own and, as such, any misconceptions, biases, and emphases are her own.

This paper was written for feminist activists who are already versed with development on the continent and engaged in current debates, movement building and organising. The author leaves the technical or rather *technicist*, footnote riddled, jargon laden, Millennium Development Goal thinking and style of writing to those who have such skills.

The Africa we love



It is official! The African continent is no longer ‘the dark continent’. It is no longer generally seen as that place where nothing positive ever happens.¹ The good news coming out of a sizeable number of African countries over the last five years is literally worth writing home about. The main ‘headlines’ of this good news include:

Multiparty politics is now the order of the day. This has been a sustained trend since the early to mid 1990s. It marks a major departure from the days of military coups, one party states, and simply unelected leadership. Women – young and older – are playing fairly significant roles in political party leadership.

Elections are now held regularly in most countries.

- Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) have developed election norms and standards which are held up as models of good practice.
- Women are participating in elections both as candidates and voters.
- There are visibly higher levels of voter awareness and political ‘literacy’ as women exercise their agency and free choice.

Constitutionalism: a significant number of countries have revised their constitutions, or adopted completely different ones from their inherited post independence constitutions. We have the inclusion of women’s rights in the constitutions of Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Progressive policies and legislation: several countries have anti domestic violence legislation. Some have affirmative action policies to enhance gender parity in education and political participation.

Increasing numbers of women in parliaments: we have seen increasing numbers of women in parliaments and in other decision making structures in governments, judiciaries and civil services (Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda).

Economic growth: 16 out of the 29 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa. Growth rates are as high as 5.2 to 5.7%. Also we have seen increasing levels of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI).²

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are largely on track: there has been visible and quantifiable progress towards achieving MDGs.

Overall HIV prevalence on the continent has been reduced: from 5.9% in 2001, to 4.9 % in 2011. Botswana, Rwanda and Namibia achieved universal access to antiretrovirals (ARVs) by 2012.³

Women’s rights are firmly on the agenda: thanks to feminist organising, we can safely say this is true across the continent. Granted, there is much rhetoric and lip service. But the fact that women’s human rights are mentioned, talked about, measured and reported on by governments, the media and other organisations and institutions is significant.

1 See *The Economist*, which moved from calling Africa *The Hopeless Continent* on its cover on 11 May 2000 to *The Hopeful Continent – Africa Rising* on 3 December 2011.

2 *MDG Report 2013 Assessing Progress in Africa toward the Millennium Development Goals, Food Security in Africa: Issues, Challenges and Lessons*. African Union Commission, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. 2013

3 *Ibid*

Africa is connected: the continent has witnessed some of the most dramatic growth in mobile phone usage (up 17% from 2010 to 2011), increase in internet connectivity, and use of new IT as well as social media. In some countries, penetration of mobile telephony is as high as 86% – in contrast to ten years ago when the average African had no access to a landline.⁴

From the World Bank to the Economist and the UN, all of these have been acknowledged and highlighted as some of the most significant markers of just how far the continent's economic and political indicators have shifted in the last five to ten years. It is important to consistently keep track of these trends and give credit where it is due. Within some of these indicators lie significant opportunities that feminist movements should seize, and continue to expand women's rights and choices within them.

Even as we celebrate the positive, the old bad news is still with us. And new challenges have arisen. The sections below provide details on these from the perspective of women's human rights.

Growth without human rights and development



The UN High Level Panel on the post 2015 agenda points out that one of the biggest threats facing the world today is inequality.⁵ This inequality is seen in terms of income, access to assets and resources, as well as access to public services such as education and health care. Gender inequality as a factor added to these inequalities doubles the burden for women; triples it for rural women; and quadruples it for rural women living with disabilities, HIV, or other social factors.

A good number of countries have witnessed growth – thanks to new natural resource finds, like gas, oil, and diamonds. We need to ask who has access to and controls these resources and the benefits which arise from them. To what extent are the benefits widely shared?

Examples from countries such as Zimbabwe, where the discovery of diamonds has not necessarily translated into broader community benefits, are illustrative. In well resourced countries such as Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Africa, there remains a staggering gap between ordinary women and those who own and control the resources (a few local male elites, and their foreign multinational companies/investors).⁶

Corruption, tax evasion and lack of state accountability fuel inequality. Research by a range of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) shows how big mining companies and individuals get massive tax breaks. Research further shows how, if companies paid taxes at the rate they should, it would be enough to fund development programmes in those countries.⁷ This means the state has no resource base to invest in social development that could benefit women and other excluded groups. Corruption also means resources are diverted into individual hands rather than into a national 'pot' from which all could benefit.

Of more concern, is that much of the growth currently witnessed is driven by extractivism: oil, gas, forest products and other resources that come out of the land. Growth also hinges on massive use of land and water. The sustainability of this model of growth, the immediate and long term impact on the environment, and impact on the rights and livelihoods of poor/excluded rural women are major concerns. (See land grabs below).

Extractivism is at the heart of political power struggles in many countries, including DRC, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Violent conflicts, with their terrible impact on women's human rights, such as what we see in the DRC and the Central African Republic (CAR), are illustrative of the potent mix between economic rights and politics. In DRC, which is now referred to as the rape epicentre of the world, it is not necessarily true that Congolese men are more predisposed to committing sexual violence, nor that they (black men) are more brutal than any other men in the world, (contrary to what 'journalists' like Gwynne Dyer think⁸). The conflict in DRC is resource driven. The men who own diamond, gold or cobalt mines, sitting in Belgium, Canada or China are as accountable for the rape of Congolese women as the black men in DRC are.

We need to shift the discussion and highlight the role and responsibility of these externally based and largely invisible powers in DRC. Feminists need to understand the complex web of ownership and control of resources in extractivist⁹ economies. This will help us advocate beyond raising awareness or providing safety and shelter to survivors of the violence.

5 *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty And Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development*. United Nations, 2013. Viewed November 2013 from: www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf

6 *Millennium Development Goals, Country Report 2013; The South African I know, The Home I understand*. The Republic of South African, 2013. Viewed November 2013 from http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/MDG_October-2013.pdf

7 *Give us a break: How big companies are getting tax-free deals*. ActionAid, June 2013. Viewed November 2013 from http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/give_us_a_break_-_how_big_companies_are_getting_tax-free_deals_21_aug.pdf

8 Dyer, G, September 2013. *Rape is an African Problem*. The Georgia Straight. Viewed November 2013 from: <http://www.straight.com/news/424761/gwynne-dyer-rape-african-problem>

9 For more on the definition of extractivism and how progressive groups from the global South use it see: http://wiki.elearning.uni-bielefeld.de/wikifarm/fields/ges_cias/field.php/Main/Unterkapitel53 [Accessed November 2013]

In this same context, the role of the so called emerging economies across the continent is a phenomenon which feminists need to understand. They should analyse the impact on and/or benefit to women in these economies. There has been much discussion of China's expanding role in Africa. Negative perceptions are largely driven by Northern NGOs, academics and governments (read former colonial masters in most cases) who are threatened by the entry of a new player in what they consider their stomping ground.

While there have been negative impacts in the wake of China's investments in Africa – including violation of labour rights, abuse of women, land expropriations, dumping of cheap but bad clothing, closure of industries that used to employ mostly women – these must be balanced by evidence based analyses of what can be gained from South–South cooperation. This cooperation should include other BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and Nigeria.

The discussion must include the already negative impacts of South Africa's entry into other African countries. For example, South African supermarkets displacing local shops and products (Ghana), imports of cheaper South African fruit and vegetables (Zambia), and displacing women vendors and small scale growers, as well as large scale land acquisitions (Malawi and Mozambique).

Organising issues

We need to address the following issues around growth, human rights and development:

- What are the prospects and opportunities for women's economic empowerment in this context?
- We need to generate new knowledge about women's participation in extractive economies as well as impacts of extractives on women's human rights.
- Regarding the role of China, and other BRICS/emerging economies, we need to:
 - understand the impacts on women's human rights
 - explore South–South/women–women linkages
- Influence the post 2015 agenda which has already identified issues of growth without development.
- Identify links between extractivist driven growth and militarism, put violence against women high on the global agenda, and demand accountability from all power holders.

Human rights have gone out of fashion



Since the MDGs came into effect it seems that women's human rights have gone out of fashion. Right from the start, feminists critiqued the MDGs as 'minimalist development goals',¹⁰ reducing the promise of Beijing from 13 areas of concern to a mere single goal. Although it can be argued WHR was mainstreamed in the other seven, their targets and indicators were not necessarily those most prioritised by feminist movements. Effectively, the Beijing Platform for Action has been pushed aside as governments and donors all focus on the MDGs and achieving them by 2015. There is already too much focus on the post MDG agenda.

Indications point once again to another pared down set of goals and targets, with even weaker language for women's human rights.¹¹ The United Nations (UN) is not planning any big Beijing +20 event. A debate that started in 2010 amongst women's movements appears to have reached consensus that the global political context is not conducive to a positive outcome from a big event of that nature. However, besides an outcome document, women will also miss out on the momentum that an event of that magnitude generates. Including the media attention, spaces for younger and older feminists to come together and debate issues – new and old – as well as opportunities to build younger feminists' knowledge, skills and capacities to set a women's rights agenda.

Those of us who 'grew up' in the era of the big UN conferences in the 1990s cannot even begin to quantify what those processes (not so much the products) meant for us and our movements. By subsuming the WHR agenda under the MDGs there is the danger that once again WHR will be relegated to one goal, badly mainstreamed and subjected to horse trading in the interests of coming up with shorter and more measurable set of goals and targets. This deprives women of the opportunity to set a new human rights' agenda which would come with new resources.

Across the board, we have also seen a watering down of the language of women's rights and the ultimate goal of what this struggle is about. This has been accompanied by apologetic language, concepts, and a narrowing of the agenda. Examples include:

- The oft' heard refrain, 'gender is about men and women, where are the men...?' Power and power relations have been forgotten, or conveniently expunged from discourse and practice. This is particularly grating in Africa where calls to be 'culturally sensitive' often mean apologising and equating violations of women and girls' rights to what happens to men and boys.¹²
- Inclusion of men in all gender equality programmes with little attention paid, amongst others, to:
 - power relations between women and men participating in the programmes
 - the distinction between objective and strategy, meaning, 'What is the goal of male inclusion and is it always a necessary strategy in all circumstances?'
 - leadership questions
 - access to resources.¹³
- New and consistent reference to women's 'roles' rather than 'rights'. The net effect being instrumentalisation of women and girls to achieve other goals rather than their own rights.

10 *A Change of Course: The Millennium Development Goals through the lens of the Women's Global Charter for Humanity*. World March of Women with support from NOVIB, 2005. Viewed November 2013 from <http://www.un-ngls.org/orf/un-summit-World-March-Women.pdf>

11 Moro-Coco, M., Raaber, N. *Getting at the Roots: Reintegrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in the post 2015 Development Agenda*. The Association for Women's Rights in Development, October 2012. Viewed November 2013 from http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/getting_at_the_roots_reintegrating_human_rights_gender_equality_in_post2015_development_agenda.pdf

12 Symington, A. *Gender Mainstreaming: Can it work for Women's Rights?* In *Spotlight*, Number 3, November 24. The Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004. Viewed November 2013 from http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/spotlight_gender_mainstreaming_can_it_work_for_womens_rights.pdf

13 Meer, S. *Struggles for Gender Equality: Reflections on the place of men and men's organisations*. OPEN DEBATE 02 Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2011. Viewed November 2013 from http://osisa.org/sites/default/files/sup_files/open_debate_2_reflections_on_the_place_of_men_and_mens_organisations_in_the_struggle_for_gender_equality.pdf

- In some instances, the over representation of men in organisations and institutions which are supposed to be leading women's rights struggles. This seems to be the trend from the UN to community based organisations (CBOs). At what point, and in which spaces, will women be leaders of their own emancipation?

Sadly, there has not been much discussion, writing and analysis by African feminists on how we are experiencing this trend and what it means for our organising.

Organising issues

We need to address the following questions and issues around human rights:

- If we don't go 'back to Beijing', is the post MDG agenda going to be enough to address women's rights challenges in the current context?
- We need to reclaim the WHR agenda, reassert human rights' language and concepts, and frame agendas around them.
- At the pan African level, the movements need to reorganise more visibly. The collapse of regional networks such as Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), Women and Law in East Africa (WLEA), International Community of Women Living with HIV (ICW), in Africa is cause for concern. As more and more decisions are made and consensus reached at the AU or the RECs, women's movements have to be visibly organised in and around those spaces.

The future has returned to bite us: rural women's rights



Land grabs. Large scale land based investments. Call it what you will, this phenomenon is having negative impacts on the rights of rural women across the region (Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Mozambique). This comes on the back of an already existing problem – women's limited access to and fragile control over land. Add to this the very limited to almost nonexistent organising by feminist and women's rights organisations. Although this is one of the most well researched and documented issues, it is a major indictment on our movements that we have not converted this knowledge into tools for advocacy to change the status quo.

However, there is contestation over whether land grabs are positive or negative, and whether weak and corrupt states and local elites can be expected to promote and protect women's rights. At the same time, there is growing evidence to show that land is not just a space to grow food. Land represents power and empowerment for those who own and control it, including the power to make decisions, economic power, political power and sexual bargaining power.¹⁴

It is also increasingly clear that the struggle for women's rights to land needs to go beyond the household and the village. The land grabbers are big companies – bankers and foreign governments in cahoots with local elites.¹⁵ The struggle is no longer just against husbands and chiefs who deny women land in the name of culture and tradition. Some have even called it the new scramble for Africa!

Organising issues

These are the critical organising issues around rural women's rights. We need to:

- Reposition land as not just a place to grow food and feed families. Land is about power.
- Encourage feminist to organise around land rights. We need to mobilise rural women and engage in campaigns more consistently and visibly.
- Go beyond 'the village' and take on the big players who are behind the land grabs; and take advantage of existing weak tenure systems.
- Link the above to extractivist driven growth and all the associated negative impacts: on the land itself, on water, on the environment and on women's livelihoods off farm – for example, the shea nut gatherers in Ghana.
- Strengthen emerging rural women's movements, and the fledgling 'women and extractives' movements and discourse.

14 *From marginalisation to empowerment: The potential of land rights to contribute to gender equality – observations from Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone.* ActionAid, February 2013. Viewed November 2013 from http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/from_marginalisation_lr.pdf

15 Kachingwe, N. *From Under Their Feet a think piece on the gender dimensions of land grabs in Africa.* Action Aid, April 2012. Viewed November 2013 from <http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/actionaidfromundertheirfeet.pdf>



Women in the city

African women are now permanent city residents. This is a sea change from as late as the 1980s where women tended to live in rural areas while their men folk lived and worked, temporarily it was thought, in cities. The history books tell the story of active exclusion and expulsion of black women from cities, particularly the married and younger ones. This was the case particularly in settler colonies like Rhodesia, South Africa and Kenya. In that context, women had no independent rights to, amongst others, housing, employment, education and health care.¹⁶ Fast forward to the present; African cities are growing at phenomenal speed. It is estimated that by 2050, close to a quarter of the populations of many countries on the continent will be resident in cities.¹⁷

Yet African governments are still in denial about this reality. They have not prepared themselves for the already noticeable impacts on shelter and infrastructure such as water and sanitation, transport, education and health care. More importantly, they have not prepared themselves for the expected greener economic pastures those who move from rural areas to cities expect to find. In many cases, women and men are running from poor/unproductive soils, impacts of climate change – like lack of water – and for the younger ones, lack of economic opportunities off farms.

This is a whole new area for women's organising in many African countries where organising has tended to focus on rural development, or the so called 'women in remote areas'.

Organising issues

The first thing to highlight is that it is now legitimate within a women's rights' framework to work only with women in cities! The following are rights to mobilise around:

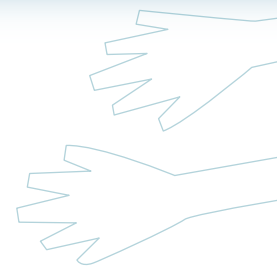
- Women's rights TO the city;¹⁸ as residents and citizens. This includes the rights to:
 - access the city
 - be in the city
 - be recognised as urban dwellers in their own right.
- Women's rights IN the cities, once they establish residence. This includes the rights to:
 - shelter
 - access to infrastructure and services
 - freedom of movement – for younger women in particular, without being accused of prostitution
 - safety and security as women navigate their way in cities to earn and make decent livelihoods for themselves
 - safety and security from violence
 - economic opportunities, including the rights of informal workers and business owners.

16 Barnes, T., 1999. "We Women Worked So Hard" *Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956*. Greenwood Publishing Group Incorporated.

17 Kessides, C., 2006. *The Urban Transition in Sub-Saharan Africa Implications for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction*. The Cities Alliance.

18 Harvey, D., The Rights to the City. Undated. Viewed November 2013 from <http://www.davidharvey.org/media/righttothecity.pdf>

The unfinished business of heterosexuality



‘Reproductive and sexual health remains one of the weakest areas of human rights in Africa’. No, this was not said by a human rights’ lawyer. This comes from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in their 2013 report on the MDGs. One can only add: this is the Achilles heel of the women’s movements on the continent. It is not just governments whose interventions have been weak at best, and at worst retrogressive. Individual female leaders and women’s groups have tended to skirt around sexuality, sexual rights, sexual orientation, and even basic discussion of how heterosexuality – and all that goes with it – is at the heart of gender inequality. Examples include:

- The payment of bride price, which many of us have tried to sanitise and claim as being about ‘building relationships between a woman and a man’s family’. *Lobola*, as it is called in most countries in Southern Africa, is for a woman’s reproductive capacity. There are many consequences and expectations once it is paid. English translation: that body, that vagina, that uterus is not yours.¹⁹
- Similarly, when engaged in conversation, most people have no problem with a woman inheriting. The key issue is: who she sleeps with after the husband dies, or who she sleeps with/marries later on in life if she inherits? Again, it boils down to the ‘cattle kraal’ and who controls it.
- Another way the problem has manifested itself is that most men will indicate that they have no problems paying maintenance for their children. But if the man is not having sex with the mother then the children can’t get the maintenance.
- Female orgasm and sexual pleasure is largely a foreign concept – to both women and men.
- Female genital mutilation (FGM), elongation of the labia and tightening the vagina with harmful chemicals or herbs are all based on common principles: to heighten male sexual pleasure and control women’s sexuality.
- HIV and AIDS are but ‘branches’ of a well rooted tree. Three decades of anti AIDS struggles have still not fundamentally shifted sexual attitudes, behaviour and cultures surrounding the pandemic.
- Maternal and child mortality are also mostly driven by gender (sexual) inequality.
- Unmet contraceptive needs, high levels of unsafe abortion and high incidence of early and/or coerced marriage are all indicators of more fundamental sexual and reproductive rights issues.

One could go on and on about these issues. Suffice to say, heterosexism, heteronormativity and unequal power relations in sexual relationships remain intractable. There has been some marked progress in challenging heteronormativity led by the emerging Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) movements in several countries. This is quite remarkable and must be celebrated. However, there has not been a comparable focus on tackling some of the underlying sexual autonomy, choice and bodily integrity issues women face because of heterosexist societal norms.

19 In Shona and Nguni customs, lobola/bride price is paid for a woman’s reproductive capacity. Thus for a man to get access to a woman’s vagina/reproductive capacity he must pay. Hence rape is seen as an invasion not of the woman’s bodily integrity and violation of her rights, but of the rights of her father to get the bride price.

Organising issues

These are the critical organising issues around sexual rights:

- The HIV 'door' that provided an opportunity to discuss and challenge some of the above issues is closing as the pandemic is controlled and funding shifts. At the same time, there is a vast architecture that has been put in place from community based awareness raising champions to global advocates for sexual rights. This well trained and committed network of people needs to be reoriented towards sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).
- AIDS service organisations need to reinvent themselves and make connections with SRHR.
- We need to reposition advocacy around sexual violence against women and girls. This is because disproportionate attention has been paid to domestic violence (mostly physical domestic violence).
- Current campaigns on early marriage must drill deeper into sexual rights and health issues in addition to the age factor.
- The post 2015 agenda needs to squarely tackle issues underlying maternal mortality.
- We need more concerted efforts to build bridges between LGBTI, sex workers and heterosexual women's movements. In doing so, we should take nothing for granted and not make assumptions about one another's levels of knowledge, understanding or comfort with one another's issues.

Jesus' deputies, hidden power and the erosion of secular spaces



Women's human rights are under threat from fundamentalisms. Christian fundamentalism is on the rise across the entire continent, with some countries exporting it to others. For example, Nigeria and Ghana export 'prophets' through live television casts. The United States based, fundamentalist, right wing churches have been most aggressive in their mission. While Islamic fundamentalism has been named and recognised, Christianity in all its forms is still generally seen and cast as a force for good.

On the flip side of the same coin, there is a noticeable increase in cultural fundamentalisms. This manifests itself in the vociferous calls for – plus actual return to and deepening of – retrogressive traditional practices, values and beliefs. These include virginity testing, early marriage, FGM, polygamy, and enforcement of traditional laws that are anti women's rights, by traditional leaders who are playing bigger roles in justice systems. An illustrative example is the ever increasing deference to tradition and culture in South Africa where active attempts to undermine the country's progressive post apartheid constitution are underway.

Religious and cultural fundamentalisms are neatly linking with each other, finding convergence in an anti women's rights agenda. Exclusion and intolerance of alternative lifestyles has become fairly prevalent. Secular spaces have become quite scarce, as Christian fundamentalists take over radio stations, television, newspapers, the internet (including Facebook), as well as women's rights organisations and civil society movements. Rare is a convening that does not begin with a Christian prayer, or an office not taken over by prayer sessions, let alone a computer screen or office wall without Jesus and/or his representatives!

The most worrying impact of these fundamentalisms is their convergence with and impact on the state. We have:

- individual state presidents bringing their beliefs into the public arena
- judges declaring that their religious beliefs would not let them sanction abortion or divorce
- police refusing to arrest pastors accused of raping women
- legislation proposed, passed or blocked at the behest of religious leaders in cahoots with parliamentarians and some sectors of civil society.


In Uganda, we have already witnessed the impact of local fundamentalisms on LGBTI rights. A gay rights' activist, David Kato, was murdered in January 2011. According to website philosophedia.org he was often referred to as the father of Uganda's gay rights movement.

'He was beaten to death with a hammer. Police officials claimed the motive was robbery, but Val Kalende, the chairwoman of one of Uganda's gay rights groups, said, 'The Ugandan government and the so-called US evangelicals must take responsibility for David's blood.'²⁰

In Nigeria, there have been attempts to pass moralistic legislation controlling how women dress.²¹ In other words, the most prevalent brands of Christianity that have taken over the continent are intolerant, exclude others, are homophobic, and will take women's rights back by a whole century.

20 http://philosophedia.org/index.php/David_Kato [Accessed November 2013]

21 Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. *Of mini-skirts and morals: social control in Nigeria*. 50.50 Inclusive Democracy, 22 February 2012. Viewed November 2013 from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/bibi-bakare-yusuf/of-mini-skirts-and-morals-social-control-in-nigeria>



Organising issues

Around fundamentalism, we need to:

- Identify Christian fundamentalism, particularly in secular spaces.
- Call out individual leaders on their intolerant and excluding behaviours, again in secular movements and spaces.
- Do more research, gain knowledge and promote analysis on the length and breadth of Christian fundamentalist networks and their impact on specific women's rights. We particularly need to surface the links between religion and the state.
- Name and shame the sponsors of the fundamentalisms and mount campaigns, for example, against US based movements.
- Make hidden powers visible, whether they are secular or religious, that have a hold over women's lives. These include supernatural powers and traditional leaders.

Women's political participation – investing where power really lies



We have been sold, and enthusiastically bought, a dud. The struggle to increase women's participation in decision making and politics started off, rightly, as a struggle for social justice and equity. The MDG framework took it a bit further by making numbers of women in national parliaments a specific target for progress on the gender equality goal. Over the last two decades, women's movements and donors have invested significant energy and resources to increase the numbers and, lately, the quality of women's participation in parliaments and cabinets. The story of the numbers is one of the most chronicled. Women have held significant cabinet posts, like Finance in Nigeria, Defence in South Africa and Justice in Liberia. We have even seen the rise of two women to presidential positions (Liberia and Malawi) and vice presidents (Zimbabwe and South Africa, at some point). All of this is commendable.

The critical questions:

- Are we increasing the numbers of women in spaces where real power is exercised?
- Where are decisions really made in most African countries? Is it in parliaments and cabinets, or is it in central committees of ruling parties?
- Who makes decisions? Is it the president alone, with a cabal? If so, can this cabal be named, and is it 'at the table'?

Sadly, history and current practice tell the story of hidden power. In most Southern African countries, where the ruling parties were born out of liberation movements (read: well organised, powerful, hierarchical, and very much lodged in citizens' hearts and minds) decisions are not made in parliaments. Add to this the power and influence of former guerrilla leaders turned soldiers, for example, the power of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces and, in Uganda, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) which, with its military might and militarised way of operating, is still very much in the saddle.

In these contexts, the challenge for women entering what are visible decision making arenas, is to understand the hidden powers, how these operate, and at the same time satisfy demands from women's movements. While one does not want to suggest undermining parliaments and dealing only with the unelected and invisible powers, it is also pragmatic to say women's movements must invest in understanding more deeply how power operates in their national and regional contexts. They can then strategically allocate their time, energy and resources.

Organising issues

We need to address the following regarding power:

- Numbers still matter but let's always ask where these numbers matter.
- Values, principles and feminist vision should become the basis on which women's movements support women entering political office. Some accountability mechanisms need to be worked out. The African Charter of Feminist principles²² is a good starting point.
- Invest in understanding power, how it operates, and whether it is hidden or visible. We need to understand who exercises power and how to interface and influence power holders from local to global levels.
- Surface and name hidden power, particularly that which undermines visible power or institutions supposed to represent women's wishes.
- Deprioritise this issue and/or reprioritise it, based on real content – that is, what women want from their leaders.

22 The African Feminist Forum, Undated. Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists. African Women's Development Fund. Viewed November 2013 from http://awdf.org/wp-content/uploads/Charter_of_Feminist_Principles_for_African_Feminists.pdf



How we organise

Women's lives on the African continent have changed quite dramatically over the last decade. This includes where they live, how they live, how they access information and their livelihoods. These have all changed in a positive or negative way. New communication technologies, urbanisation, climate change and shifting political sands have all had innumerable influences on how women live. It therefore stands to reason that the ways in which women relate to one another and organise must also change.

In some cases, it is already changing. Older women in rural areas now receive money from their children in faraway places via mobile phones. Younger women are permanently attached to Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Urban informal sector traders travel to Dubai, China and Brazil to buy goods for resale. Some are illiterate. How they cross three borders, bargain with wholesalers and manufacturers (possibly in Mandarin and Portuguese), is hard to imagine.

Single mothers hold down two or three means of livelihood just to get by, for example, hair dressing, plus selling mobile phone airtime, plus sex work. In the poorest slums and townships, the poorest will do all they can to access digital satellite television so they can watch Nollywood movies, the gospel channel and African soap operas such as the popular South African show, *Generations*. The world as some of us knew it barely a decade ago has changed. So have the women we thought we knew.

The leadership of women's movements has also changed. Twenty years ago, it could be assumed that most leaders came from rural backgrounds, had direct personal experience of poverty and/or the rights violations they spoke about, and had barely travelled outside the continent. Now it is not uncommon to find a director born and bred in the city, a programme manager born in the diaspora and only recently returned to the country of origin – and with dual citizenship. This is not to suggest any of this is negative. It highlights our need to relook at who is who in women's organisations; what they know, understand and what their lived realities are. We must not make assumptions about their knowledge, skills and capacity to organise, relate to and engage with women of different social and economic class and lived experience. If there are huge divides then bridges must be built and the necessary capacity building undertaken. Similarly, heteronormativity pervades the women's movements, with leaders and activists of yore mostly heterosexual and with little knowledge, experience and/or consciousness of diverse sexual orientations.

Most women's organisations continue to insist on old methods of organising and reaching women: five hour workshops under a tree, printed pamphlets and booklets flying about the village on their own, radio programmes on national stations nobody listens to, long articles in daily newspapers that nobody has time to read. At the upper end of the spectrum, women's movements have become more adept at policy analysis. We have internalised the SADC protocol, the AU charters and we know the spin on MDGs. One can uncharitably say many of us sound like a UN manual!

In between are the women, the 'new' ones we do not seem to fully understand and/or engage with because our old tools do not work for their lived realities. More worryingly, across Africa the NGO has become the most dominant form of civil society organisation. Less visible, supported or encouraged are autonomous rights holders' movements. In fact, the question, 'Do we have a (singular), women's movement in country x, or in Africa?' reflects this way of thinking and organising. Building strong rights holder driven and owned movements, or building constituencies for NGOs, is a major challenge.

Issues for reorganising and building movements

- New technologies can revolutionise the way women's rights movements organise in African countries. Organisations can start by investing much more in their own communications strategies, capacities and necessary technologies. Updating websites regularly would be a good start.
- Use new technologies and social media to connect with women who are connected, particularly the younger ones, bearing in mind the limits and limitations but also the unexplored potential for social change.
- Challenge patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and violence against women – which are now on the rise thanks to the very same new technologies and social media.
- Use social media more for collective common good than for promoting individual feminist celebrity culture, which also appears on the rise, even amongst ourselves.
- (Re)build strong, constituency based feminist movements. We need to move away from one woman shows and single phrase declarations like, 'Young women are marginalised'. A statement or a phrase doth not a programme make.
- Go back to the basics of working with women:
 - start with where women are
 - speak their language
 - use popular education and communication methods
 - link the local to the global and vice versa
- At regional and global levels, hold serious conversations about how to organise African women's movements so there is greater visibility and participation in significant decision making spaces.



Conclusions

The African continent is on the rise. Economic growth, increasing use of technology and new media, as well as increasing political and social stability, are some of the indicators of this rise. There have also been some significant gains for women and some visible steps in the right direction for women's human rights. HIV prevalence is going down. Many governments have passed progressive legislation to promote and protect women's rights. Most of these gains have been brought about by the power of feminist organising and civil society advocacy.

While there is a lot to celebrate, some of the old challenges still remain and new ones have emerged:

- growth without rights based development
- increasing inequality within and amongst countries
- extractivism and land expropriations
- religious and cultural fundamentalisms.

All these are some of the most intractable barriers to women's empowerment and gender equality. Therefore:

- feminist movements need to reclaim leadership and set the women's human rights' agenda
- feminists must reclaim the language of development because language shapes policy and practice
- feminists must also protect the gains women have made over the last few decades so they are not reversed, or reopen them for negotiation
- a new feminist agenda must insist on the separation of church or mosque and state; our agenda must jealously guard secular spaces where religious and other fundamentalisms are challenged and do not monopolise airtime everywhere
- movement building and feminist women's leadership must be the hallmarks of how we organise.



Rudo Chigudu performing the vagina monologue at the WHR event in Nairobi in 2013.

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Nafi Chinery
Capacity Building Programme Specialist
AWDF