

The African Feminist Forum: Beginnings

by L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Why an African Feminist Forum?

The African Feminist Forum (AFF), convened in Accra, Ghana in November 2006 was both a significant moment and process. For the first time ever, it brought together over 120 self-defined African feminists to autonomously debate—with creativity, passion and rigour—analysis and strategies of the African women's movement. It was also the culmination of efforts over several years to create an extraordinary kind of reflective space—and we intend it to continue.

Africa is immense. While its states share a colonial past, the weight of international development financing, trade, and investment agreements and movements towards enhanced democracy are also diverse and uneven. These diversities in both pre- and post-independence Africa are many. For those working in the African women's movement, the opportunities to share experiences across the continent are few and far between, usually provided by

meetings of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) where the focus is on advocacy around those IGOs or by meetings convened by African women's organisations working in specific thematic sectors.

The adoption by African states of gender mainstreaming as the key strategy to advance African women's human rights has paradoxically made visible and invisible African feminist perspectives in the analysis of issues and the plotting of strategies by the African women's movement. This has been reinforced by a similar stance by the bilateral and multilateral development financing institutions which support these states. But gaps remain in several important areas. While there exists a growing body of feminist theory and African feminist scholarship, it is rare that such scholarship informs the analysis and strategies of the African women's movement. While the amount of artistic and creative work by African cultural producers that tackles issues from African feminist perspectives has been growing, substantive linkages among them and the African women's movement have yet to be made.



L. Muthoni Wanyeki at the Press Conference of the Feminist Dialogues in Nairobi, Kenya.

Many contradictions abound—between analysis and strategies, as well as between strategies adopted in different thematic sectors. Unresolved questions also plague relations with African states—and methodologies to advance concrete, legal, policy and practice reform in favour of African women’s human rights. There are even more vexed questions about constituencies of the African women’s movement and how best to revitalise mass conscientisation and organisation in our own best interests.

Thus, the idea of the AFF—to bring together self-identified African feminists to critically explore where, from its analysis and strategies, the African women’s movement is headed.

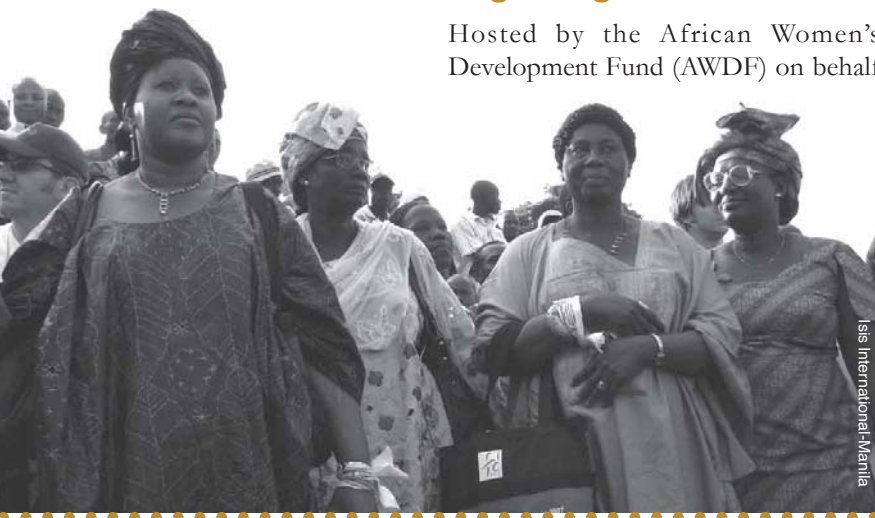
Organising the AFF

Hosted by the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) on behalf

of a small coordinating group from around the continent, the AFF was by invitation only—from a list compiled by the coordinating group and collectively assessed against previously defined criteria. The aim was not to be representative, although efforts were made to ensure diversity among the participants as concerns the activist/academic divide, age, language, sexual orientation and others. The aim was instead to bring together the most influential and interesting activists and thinkers of the African women’s movement—provided that they were known to self-identify as **feminist** and were not known to have contravened any of the criteria agreed upon. In this way, the AFF hoped to catalyse a nucleus of African feminists, go deep into theory and solid organising, and only then build outwards—rather than deflect energies right at the start.

The AFF itself was constructed in a creative and participatory way. Four overarching themes agreed upon by the coordinating group were tackled over a four-day period through plenaries and workshops. Equally important, artistic presentations, mock call-in shows, mock debates were facilitated as well as inter-generational lunch-time table discussions. Throughout the AFF, participants were urged to make use of the self-care spaces offering services as diverse as massage and sexuality workshops, and to shop at the craft and fabric market that had been convened on-site. Participants also had to participate in an African dance aerobics session to fundraise for costs. With programme coordination by Ayesha Imam, programme facilitation by Theo Sowa and the amazing design and logistical work of the AWDF’s staff, the AFF was—by far—the most enjoyable, inspiring and tension-free

African feminists and gender rights advocates at the opening of the 2007 World Social Forum, Nairobi, Kenya.



Isis International/Mantia

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meeting that many participants had been to in a long, long time.

There were several key outcomes from the AFF. First, a timeline of the African women's movement from pre-independence to the present. Second, the beginnings of a database of self-defined African feminists. Third, the

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summary of discussions pending the production of the full report. Finally, the adoption of a Charter of Principles for African Feminists—dealing with issues of ethics, both personal and institutional (please see below).

A website has been constructed on which most materials can be found: www.africanfeministforum.org. But it is worth saying more about the purpose of the Charter. The aim really is to provide a set of principles by which self-defined African feminists signing onto the Charter can be held accountable—both personally as well as in relation to

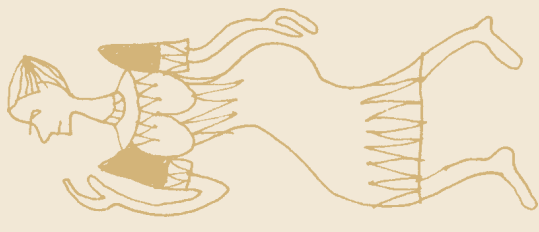
the institutions they work in. The principles cover some of the most contentious issues of the African women's movement today—coming down clearly and unequivocally in favour, for example, of choice and the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The hope is to help foster confidence in addressing such issues personally and, as importantly, institutionally. For the principles also cover some of the hardest internal concerns of the African women's movement today—ethics in governance, financial, and human resource management and so on from an African feminist perspective. The aim is to contribute profoundly to the building of institutions within the African women's movement that live up to the promise of African feminism both internally and externally.

The plan is to hold another AFF in two or three years, with the AWDF hosting it for one more time. In the meantime, it is hoped that the materials generated will filter back into the African women's movement to inform our day-to-day work. ■

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CHARTER OF FEMINIST PRINCIPLES FOR AFRICAN FEMINISTS



NAMING OURSELVES AS FEMINISTS

We define and name ourselves publicly as **Feminists** because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognise that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming ourselves is political as well. Choosing to name ourselves **Feminists** places us in a clear ideological position.

By naming ourselves **Feminists**, we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformative analysis and action.

We have multiple and varied identities as **African Feminists**. We are African women—we live in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with “*I/s*,” “*Buts*,” or “*Henever*.” We are **Feminists**. Full stop.

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF FEMINISM AND PATRIARCHY

As African feminists, our understanding of feminism places patriarchal structures and social relations systems which are embedded in other oppressive and exploitative structures at the centre of our analysis. Patriarchy is a system of male authority which legitimises the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious and military institutions. Men's access to, and control over resources and rewards within the private and public spheres derive legitimacy from the ideology of male dominance.

Patriarchy varies in time and space; it changes over time, and is inflected by class, race, ethnic, religious and global-imperial relationships. In the current conjunctures, patriarchy does not simply change according to these factors, but is inter-related with and informs relationships of class, race, ethnic, religious, and global-imperialism. Thus, to challenge patriarchy effectively also requires challenging other systems of oppression, which frequently mutually support one another.

Our understanding of patriarchy is crucial because it provides us as feminists, a framework within which to express the totality of exploitative relations which affect African women. Patriarchal ideology enables and legitimises the structuring of every aspect of our lives by establishing the framework within which society defines and views human beings and constructs male supremacy. Our ideological task is to understand this system and our political task is to end it. Our focus is on fighting patriarchy as a system rather than on fighting individuals. Therefore, as feminists, we define our work as investing individual and institutional energies in the struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation.

OUR IDENTITY AS AFRICAN FEMINISTS

As feminists who come from, work, and live in Africa, we claim the right and the space to be both Feminist and **African**. We recognise that we do not have a homogenous identity as feminists—we acknowledge and celebrate our diversities and our shared commitment to a transformatory agenda for African societies and African women, in particular. This is what gives us our common feminist identity.

Our current struggles as **African Feminists** are inextricably linked to our past as a continent—our diverse pre-colonial contexts, the burden of slavery, colonisation, subsequent and heroic liberation struggles, neo-colonialism, and globalisation. Modern African states were built on the backs of **African Feminists** who fought alongside men for the liberation of the continent. As we craft new African states in this new millennium, we also craft new identities for African women, as full citizens, free from patriarchal oppression, with rights of access, ownership and control over resources and our own bodies. We utilise positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways. We also recognise that our pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial histories and herstories require special measures to be taken in favour of particular African women living in different contexts.

We acknowledge the historical and significant gains that have been made by the African Women's Movement over the past forty years, and we boldly lay claim to these gains as **African Feminists**. Our successes happened because **African Feminists** led the way, from the grassroots level and up; they strategised, organised, networked, went on strike and marched in protest wherever it was necessary. They also did the backbreaking research, analysis, lobbying, institution building and all that it took for states, employers and institutions to acknowledge women's personhood.

As **African Feminists**, we are aware that we are also part of a global feminist movement against patriarchal oppression in all its manifestations. Our experiences are linked to that of women in other parts of the world with whom we have shared solidarity and support over the years. As we assert our space as **African Feminists**, we also draw inspiration from our feminist ancestors who blazed the trail and made it possible to affirm the rights of African women. As we invoke the memory of those women whose names are hardly ever recorded in any history books, we insist that it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported from the West. We reclaim and assert the long and rich tradition of African women's resistance to patriarchy within Africa itself. We, henceforth, claim the right to theorise for ourselves, write for ourselves, strategise for ourselves and speak for ourselves as **African Feminists**.

INDIVIDUAL ETHICS

As individual feminists, we are committed to gender equality based on these feminist principles:

- The indivisibility, inalienability, and universality of women's human rights;
- The effective participation in progressive African feminist organising and networking to bring about transformative change;
- A spirit of feminist solidarity and mutual respect based on frank, honest, and open discussion of differences;
- The support, nurture, and care of other African feminists, along with the care for our own well-being;
- The practice of non-violence and the creation and achievement of non-violent societies;
- The right of all women to live free of patriarchal oppression, discrimination, and violence;
- The right of all women to have access to sustainable and just livelihoods as well as welfare provision, including quality health care, education, water and sanitation;
- Freedom of choice and autonomy regarding bodily integrity issues, including reproductive rights, abortion, sexual identity, and sexual orientation;
- A critical engagement with discourses of religion, culture, tradition and domesticity with a focus on the centrality of women's rights;

- The recognition and presentation of African women as the subjects not the objects of our work, and as agents in their lives and societies;
- The right to healthy, mutually respectful, and fulfilling personal relationships;
- The right to express our spirituality within or outside of organised religions;
- The acknowledgment of the feminist agency of African women who have a rich *Herstory* that has been largely ignored and undocumented.

INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS

As feminist organisations, we commit to the following:

- Advocating for openness, transparency, equality, and accountability in feminist-led institutions and organisations;
- Affirming that being a feminist institution is not incompatible with being professional, efficient, disciplined, and accountable;
- Insisting on and supporting women's labour rights, including egalitarian governance, fair and equal remuneration and maternity policies;
- Using power and authority responsibly, and managing institutional hierarchies with respect for all. We believe that feminist spaces are created to empower and uplift women. At no time should we allow our institutional spaces to degenerate into sites of oppression and the undermining of other women;
- Exercising responsible leadership and organisational management, whether in a paid or unpaid capacity, and striving to uphold critical feminist values and principles at all times;
- Exercising accountable leadership in feminist organisations, taking into consideration the needs of others for self-fulfillment and professional development. This includes creating spaces for power-sharing across generations;
- Creating and sustaining feminist organisations to foster women's leadership. Women's organisations and networks should be led and managed by women. It is a contradiction of feminist leadership principles to have men leading, managing and speaking for women's organisations;
- Feminist organisations as models of good practice in the community of civil society organisations, ensuring that the financial and material resources mobilised in the name of African women are put to the service of African women and not diverted to serve personal interests. Feminist organisations must serve as models of good practice. Systems with

appropriate Codes of Conduct to prevent corruption and fraud, and to manage disputes and complaints fairly, are the means of ensuring institutionalisation within our organisations;

- Striving to inform our activism with theoretical analysis and to connect activist practice to our theoretical understanding of African feminism;
- Being open to critically assessing our impact as feminist organisations, and being honest and proactive with regards to our role in the movement;
- Opposing the subversion and/or hijacking of autonomous feminist spaces to serve right wing, conservative agenda;
- Ensuring that feminist non-governmental or mass organisations are created in response to real needs expressed by women that need to be met, and not to serve selfish interests, and unaccountable income-generating projects.

FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

As leaders in the social movement, we recognise that feminist agency has popularised the notion of women as leaders. As feminist leaders, we are committed to making a critical difference, based on the understanding that the quality of women's leadership is even more important than the numbers of women in leadership. We commit ourselves to the following:

- Disciplined work ethics guided by integrity and accountability at all times;
- Expanding and strengthening a multi-generational network and pool of feminist leaders across the continent;
- Ensuring that the feminist movement is recognised as a legitimate constituency for women in leadership positions;
- Building and expanding our knowledge and information base on an ongoing basis, as the foundation for shaping our analysis and strategies and for championing a culture of learning beginning with ourselves within the feminist movement;
- Nurturing, mentoring and providing opportunities for young feminists in a non-matronising manner;
- Crediting African women's labour, intellectual and otherwise, in our work;
- Creating time to respond in a competent, credible, and reliable manner to other feminists in need of solidarity and support whether political, practical, or emotional;
- Being open to giving and receiving peer reviews and constructive feedback from other feminists.

