

Awino Okech



African Feminist Thinkers: Our Voices [1]

If I were to trace the watershed moments in my life that re-affirmed and grew my journey with feminism I would probably say there have been three main ones. The first has to be an early journey after high school in rural Kenya with an organisation my mother founded and run. You see my mother believed that children should not be idle, so as I waited to join university I had to 'earn my keep'. KEFEADO was then one of the few organisations in Western Kenya doing any form of 'gender and development' work. Due to my mother's history as an educator most of the early projects focused on formal education institutions, specifically primary and high schools. I used to accompany my mother when she travelled with her colleagues to 'implement' these projects. I started out as an observer really, filing out registration and payment forms. This observation sporadically over two years resulted in a deep appreciation of the meaning of access to resources, questions of choice and the importance of faith. Many of the young women we encountered in these schools which were often far removed from the reach of the State saw, through school projects KEFEADO ran, people who believed in them and who facilitated the re-mobilisation of local opportunities.

The second 'moment' would be my enrollment and subsequent journey with the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. This is a relationship that resulted in three-degree programmes. The first was a one-year Honours degree required by the University as a 'transitional' space into a Master's programme. I must admit I was highly 'irritated' by having to go through it but valued the experience for it was here that I encountered for the very first time feminist scholars, thinkers and narratives especially those from the continent. However, the most critical part of this relationship, especially during my Masters and doctoral years was the collegiality and the mutual respect that the lecturers and 'mentors' at the AGI brought to their teaching and interaction with us, as students. As students we had all been through the 'school of life' and that was an integral part of the teaching and student experience. I see this as a very distinct part of my educational experience because I have not seen it replicated as a 'way of being' within other academic departments. The fact that when you walked into the AGI you were not simply a student but one that was negotiating gender, age, race, class, ethnicity, religion, was not taken for granted.

Whilst in Cape Town and this is the third 'moment', I had the opportunity to work with a collective of women artists through The Mothertongue Project. This work brought home in

many ways some of the tenets of feminism - the importance of the personal narrative to theory building, collective change, healing and transformation. The productions by the Mothertongue Project, which were always co-created with the performers, ascertained a visceral experience with the subject matter for both the performer and the audience. For the four years I was with the Mothertongue Project I developed a 'theatre for development' programme that continues to do work with diverse groups of women across Cape Town engaging questions of forced migration, HIV/AIDS, trafficking and modern day rites of passage. My Masters research was embedded in this work.

There have been several other 'aha' moments as I have gone about the business of becoming a 'professional feminist' by working with various entities in different parts of the continent. However, all of them have been grounded in the voice of a strong mother who did what she did without the 'theory' but out of instinct and a firm belief that this was not how the world was 'designed' to be. She raised her daughters to believe this. The astounding voices of birth and life sisters as well as the continuous incredulousness of a few brothers that re-affirms (for me) that patriarchy and its dubious rewards has to be dismantled.

Published and Unpublished work:

Olonisakin, Funmi & Okech, Awino (eds) 2011. Women and Security Governance in Africa. Oxford; Pambazuka Press

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- [3] <http://www.awid.org/>