

## Mweru Mwingi



### African Feminist Thinkers: Our Voices <sup>[1]</sup>

My name is Mweru Mwingi and I am a Kenyan national. I am an education researcher but was a high school teacher before I decided to recreate myself. I taught English for fourteen years (1984 to 1998) but by 1996 I was bored and uninspired and determined to get out of what had become a regimented routine. I decided to study for a master's degree in education because I enjoyed the field of education. I was convinced that changing perspectives rather than career would resolve the monotony in my job.

In 1998 I was accepted to study for MA Linguistics and MEd Education Leadership and Management at Rhodes University. I decided to pursue MEd (Education Leadership and Management) and enrolled in the Education Department. I was bored with the teaching of English and I figured that education leadership and management had the potential to get me out of a school classroom into more interesting aspects of education.

Education leadership and management coursework was an eye opener. It dawned on me, for the first time, that the success of educational institutions depended on sound management and leadership and that management and leadership styles were complex and bound to personality and individuality. In my study of leadership theory, my attention was drawn to women and leadership. I became sensitised to gender and became keen to use gender lenses in my assessment and analysis of issues in education. The interest grew and culminated in a master's thesis on women in education leadership titled *The Perceptions of Female Principals in a Male Dominated Education Environment*.

Upon completing my master's degree, my interest in gender grew. In my work as a research assistant on two projects on language policy and media impact, I began to see patterns that merged education, gender and research. Through my work experiences in these projects, I also became aware of my weak grounding in gender and women's studies. Though I had growing interest in research on gender and women, I felt insecure. What authority did I have with no theoretical grounding? Who would hear me? I decided to seek a way out to gain more knowledge and information.

In July 2000, after months of persistence I managed to get a place at the International Women University (Ifu), housed at the University of Hanover, Germany. In my three months study under the project area *Body*, I began to understand theoretically, what womanhood and feminineness constitutes in the psychosocial sense. I became sensitised to the different levels of contestation over the body, mind, emotions and intellect of woman. I was exposed to international scholars, feminists and researchers and was particularly fascinated by African women like, Nahid Toubia, Amina Mama, Ifi Amadiume, and Patricia McFadden. The

experience was daunting (they knew so much, I knew nothing), but it was timely. I came to the realisation that matters of gender denote different things depending on the part of world one is from. I identified easily with the African scholars and left Hanover convinced that I had always had an interest in gender and women's studies it is just that I had no name for it. I visualised myself charting a new career path; however, it would have education as a crossing point.

In 2001, I began my doctoral studies. My study is an inquiry into girls' educational choices and aspirations with focus on girls in rural secondary schools. In the six years that it has taken to complete my doctorate, I have continued to add to my basket of knowledge and information on gender and women's studies. I have had the opportunity to be a laureate at the CODESRIA Gender Institute and a research fellow at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town. I have as a result improved my research skills and taken keen interest in publication.

I am currently unemployed and operating as an independent education researcher. However, I am keen to join an institution of higher education or a non government organisation as researcher. I am currently doing research within community development but my passion is in education. However, my interest is in secondary education; the gateway to employment and to higher education. For the gains in primary education to bear any meaning secondary education has to become accessible to more Kenyan children, especially girls. There is therefore need for research focus on female access and participation in secondary and higher education; women, science and technology education.

I am also interested in working with ideas that have been used elsewhere to support women academics grow professionally. This includes generating funds for women to undertake research across disciplines under the banner of 'Women in Research' or 'Women in Science and Technology'. Also, instituting mentorship programmes with focus on career development, supervision, writing and publication. While it is difficult to work with these ideas outside an institution, I believe that that there are many Kenyan women who might think in the same way that I do, so please communicate with me.

#### **Publications:**

- Lupele, J. and Mwingi, M. et al. (2005). Methodological decisions in context: The dilemmas and challenges of novice African scholars. Southern African Journal of Environmental Education Vol.22, 46-58

#### **Forthcoming as a chapter in a book:**

- Mwingi, M. Looking Beyond Access: A Study of Girls, Science and Technology Education in Murang'a District, Kenya . In Science & Technology: Some Perspectives from Africa Gender, Science & Technology - Gender Institute 2003. CODESRIA: Dakar

#### **There are other articles that await revision for submission to journals:**

- Gender parity in secondary education in Kenya : An interrogation of the substantive issue crucial to education equity [please do not quote without the author's permission]
- The challenges of transition from secondary school to university: The case of girls, science and technical subjects

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