

## Standpoint

### The Africa Social Forum Feminist Dialogue: Power, Feminisms and Mobilisation

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*All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse (Alice Walker, Meridian, 150).*

Given the grim state of gender representation at the Africa Social Forum (ASF), many women persist in attending in spite of the forum's formal structure and programmes. At the December 2004 gathering in Lusaka, Zambia – which some deemed the “authoritarian social forum (ASF)” – women from across the continent eschewed hierarchical and non-participatory plenary sessions and panel discussions in favour of their own Feminist Dialogue. In rejecting a patriarchal tenor which worked to script women's exclusion, women experimented with remaking power, and in the process embodied alternatives to social movements that so often “require the death” of women's demands.

At the previous two gatherings of the Africa Social Forum, the gender battle was focused on securing greater inclusion of women in the governing council, and incorporating women-focused sessions in the forum agenda. Women lobbied at the 2003 ASF until a draft resolution on gender was issued, which mandated a 50:50 gender representation ratio for all ASF processes and activities. [1] However, the ratio has not come close to being achieved, and the ASF continues to be a space dominated largely by men, while the bulk of grassroots mobilising in delegates' home countries is undertaken by women.

Given the strength and creativity of women's mobilising on the continent, some women began to question the fight for inclusion. When the discussion and mobilising capacity of the Feminist Dialogue far outshone the rest of the forum, the focus shifted to either completely transforming existing structures, or doing away with them. Tanzanian feminist Salma Maoulidi writes on what the ASF stands to learn from women's mobilising:

The ASF has much to learn from women activists not only as strategists operating from the fringes but also on account of their connection with the grassroots where they develop and apply participatory methods. My experience with the women's movement confirms women's concern around solidarity building and continuity. Women are constantly in touch (2005: 3).

In the Feminist Dialogue, women discussed power, feminisms and mobilisation, and simultaneously enacted many of their critiques of all three. Some of these discussions and tactics will be highlighted here in the hopes that the insights of relatively few women (only about 40 participated in the Feminist Dialogue) might radiate beyond the bounds of the forum.

*When you and I are running the world, we won't replicate this unfair system, will we? Of course not – unless, of course, it changes us in the process (Delgado, 2000: 68).*

Our resistance as women, according to Corinne Kumar of Tunisia and Indonesia, speaking at the Africa Court of Women, [2] must be “a discourse of dissent, a new imaginary, one which cannot be tied to that which is dominant. The dominant must be decentred, disrupted, even interrupted.”

In breaking with the structure of other forum sessions, in which two or three panellists (usually male) addressed an audience for roughly two hours and finished by fielding a handful of questions, the Feminist Dialogue was constructed as an actual conversation – open to dissent and debate and allowing ideas to build off each other. Chairs were arranged in a large circle and, by the end of the session, nearly everyone present had spoken her

mind. The participatory form of the conversation embodied dissent against the structuring of the ASF.

In other forum discussions, which were not structured to allow the horizontal movement of knowledge between participants, the language tended to fall into patriarchal formalities. In most of the plenary sessions, men were the intended audience – and the accepted discourse of the meetings dictated this. For example, during the Africa Court of Women (which was physically structured similarly to the rest of the plenary sessions), an elderly Malawian woman spoke of losing all her adult children to AIDS – while her government and the world stood complicit. In the Feminist Dialogue, Sara Longwe, a Zambian gender activist and consultant, translated something that had not been translated the previous day: at the end of her account, the Malawian woman had thanked the men in the room. The equivalent of “Thank you, gentlemen” – the conventional closing when speaking to a formal gathering – reminded several Chichewa-speakers that women are not the intended audience of formal meetings.

The structure of the Feminist Dialogue permitted for real discussion, most of which focused on women's own ideas of feminism, thus allowing them to openly reject the many labels they have attracted because of the work they do. Throughout this process of self-definition, women spoke about the specifics of their experiences organising around HIV/AIDS treatment access, land rights, gender equity in the sphere of media and journalism, the organisational capacity of Muslim women and youth, accountable female representation in national government, and much more. A constant across these varied feminisms is their basis in action: each version is defined through women's ongoing work to break down and out of existing hierarchies.

The “race, class, gender” triad, which is employed with such ease as seemingly stand-alone evidence of African women's “triple oppression”, did not find circulation in the room. As Sherene Razack has argued, remaining in the abstract realm of “multiplying essences” does not help us to understand the real mechanisms of how power works as it positions women and structures their opportunities (1998: 12). Certainly, neo-colonial undertakings on the part of the US and other governments and international financial institutions (often enacted by national governments on the African continent) – privatisation and cost recovery schemes, the fueling of conflicts to extract natural resources, the heavy burdens of odious debt, the enforcement of unfair terms of trade – involve racist and gendered actions which keep the world economy running at the cost of keeping many in poverty. And yet, without a clear understanding of how power functions, activists run the risk of internalising colonialist assumptions about power – who can wield it, and who has been structurally incapacitated. For example, while protesting against the World Bank, many activists have unwittingly adopted the World Bank's disabling presentation of the “face of the poor”: brown and black women, and African women in particular. Since political theories and programmes are based on stories which their authors have the capacity to tell, [3] discourses across the political spectrum assume that African women perpetually require advocacy on their behalf. The liberation of African women lies outside of the dominant imagination.

Specifically, women discussed political structures (be they parliaments or the leadership bodies of social movements) as affording little room for women who wish to transform power, rather than simply fill its ranks. Corinne Kumar spoke of the need for a new notion of power: the power to facilitate and enhance. Yet such ideas are far from being widely internalised by women. As Fatma Alloo of Tanzania observed, women often identify themselves with a system that will protect them. The minute they say “No”, they will be persecuted. Thus, as another participant stated, what happens most often is that women in power become “patriarchs”. Their position is about power, control and privilege, not the transformation of existing hierarchies.

The key lies in realising the brittle nature of this type of “protection”. Many women in the room detailed how neither prevailing political systems nor social movements are providing any modicum of real protection to women. One woman argued that the women most likely to speak out are either widowed or divorced, having entirely broken out of social institutions such as marriage. Many women had similarly divorced themselves from movements that refused to hear – much less amplify – a woman’s “No”, and had founded organisations of their own. For these women, there is nothing more reactionary than a movement that requires one to obliterate herself within it, and nothing more radical than valuing oneself. By recognising the thinness of their stake in movements that are predicated on the silence of women – which require it, and thus do nothing to change it – they are making themselves truly dangerous to the status quo.

For example, Glory Mushingi highlighted the work of the Zambia Media Women Association (ZAMWA), which has created alternative publications such as the Feminist Dialogue newspaper (produced as a special edition of the ASF daily paper, the African Flame). Ten Zambian women journalists are also part of The Africa Woman Newspaper, a regional newspaper for women journalists covering women and gender issues. These efforts grew out of ongoing struggles in mainstream media outlets. As Mushingi states: “The challenges still remain where men think gender is an issue only for women, to an extent where in the media fraternity assignments or coverage on gender issues are left for women journalists and male journalists shun them because they are considered weak stories for the weaker sex.” [4]

In Tanzania, Fatma Alloo explained, women activists meet with each female politician upon her assuming office. From the very beginning of her term – and often beforehand, during her campaigning – women activists attempt to become these politicians’ primary network and base. Women activists can thus form alternative forms of “protection”, and women in high office can draw their power not from the prevailing system of patriarchal control, but from those who understand power’s underbelly. Women are providing a strong support system to Rose Migiro, Minister of Community Development, Gender and Children, who hails from a civil society movement. Mandisa Mbali of South Africa stressed the importance of such interventions, noting that South Africa Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, a woman, has consistently pushed forward policies that have worsened – and ultimately taken – the lives of poor, black, HIV-positive women.

Expressed notions of feminism and mobilisation rarely focused exclusively on gender. Many women form the base of movements generated by crisis (such as the struggles for access to treatment for HIV/Aids and against evictions and electricity cutoffs) and will continue to fight alongside their male counterparts in these struggles. Still, women are refusing to smooth the edges around their oppression in order to fit the demands of social movements. Once a specific period of crisis passes and movement members are afforded time for reflection, tensions often arise around the re-inscription of dominance within a movement. In discussing the need to be ever-vigilant in resisting the reproduction of dominance, Salma Maoulidi suggested that women must resist substitutions (2005). The language of the most powerful must be rejected and substituted with African women’s own stories. Their bodies and voices must not be replaced by others in the rooms where strategy is formulated and decisions are made. African women, particularly those struggling in the “media fraternity”, are refusing abstract representations of themselves and their interests.

Out of character with much of the forum, several action items were decided upon. These included gathering and sharing feminist literature from across the continent via an e-mail discussion list, and in existing publications such as *Feminist Africa*, the Centre for Civil Society website and *We Write*. Such ongoing exchanges will help to wrest feminist dialogue

back from the predominantly white and Northern/Western academic spaces which have co-opted and subsequently come to define – and confine – debate. The e-mail discussion list has since emerged, with energy and debate thus far centering around the contributions that African women would make at the January 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

Ideally, the discussion list will provide a space for taking up the many loose threads of the Feminist Dialogue. One woman stressed that we must share ideas on making women economically independent. In a global economy where women produce over 80% of resources, and yet own less than 20% of them, the battle for economic sovereignty for women will be long and difficult. Shallo Skaba, a coffeeworker from Ethiopia, described how deeply the politics of trade penetrate her daily life: “Coffee for us is everything. When the price declines, we cannot take care of our health, clothing, food, school for our children. When is the day for us? No one is looking for women's problems. No one considers all that women are doing in our area. Government and NGOs are not looking at us.” In the short term, women are trying to find ways to ensure that women are not further exploited by and within their own movements.

Feminist Dialogue participants created an alternative power-base and came to perceive the thinness of their stake in the dominant structures of the Africa Social Forum. Equipped with accounts of women's successful mobilising across the continent, women are shifting gender battles away from inclusion and towards revolution. Women, in various ways, are applying a critical consciousness around power to the societies they are resisting, and to the vehicles of resistance that are propelled by their energy, their sacrifices, their limited resources, their courage – but all too often, not by their decisions and the wisdom of their experiences as women.

## References

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## Footnotes

[1] For more on this process, see Maoulidi's “Africa Hosting the World Social Forum: Reflections and Options”. [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs).

[2] The Africa Court of Women was incorporated into the ASF in 2004, after several women fought hard for its place on the agenda. Arguing that existing concepts of human rights still leave women without sufficient recourse, the organisers invite women to present their situations through testimony, expert analysis, visuals, dance and music, in order to forge a more effective political vision.

[3] For more on this, see Wilderson's "Seven Notes on the Antagonism between Blacks and Humans".

[4] Glory Mushinge, e-mail correspondence with the author, 14 March 2005.

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