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African Feminist Thinkers: Our Voices [1]

My travel within and along gender studies has begun with personal experience. I may not be exact in terms of where it all started and when but as I look back I realize as a young person and from an early age my upbringing and my placement as a female in a male dominated family, community, society and state led me to be critical about relationships between men and women. Against this climate was the personal relationship I had with my father who supported me to be different in many ways from the accepted stereotypic models of good women.

That might have been the fact that drove me to transgress and take a predominantly male field at the time which was Animal Science. The struggles to get into the field and the experiences of being in the field emphasized my existing belief that there was no fairness in the way men and women related and I began to realize that this was somehow global, though the intensity and issues of concern may vary from one situation to another. Relations both within and without the learning experience itself were evidence of unbalanced power relations.

After completion of BSc. Animal Science I worked at a research station and also taught some courses at Lesotho Agricultural College. I loved being a role model for many of the female students in agriculture. As I tasted teaching I felt comfortable enough to seek out teaching as a profession. I then pursued a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. After that I worked at the National Teacher Training College as a senior lecturer in Agricultural Education. I later transferred to the Ministry of Education where I worked as an inspector of secondary and high schools. In the capacity I carried out management and subject inspections of the schools. The climates in all the spaces I occupied confirmed the unbalanced gender relations both at management and subject level in school even within the ministry.

As an inspector, I progressed with my studies and I took every opportunity to engage in and with the debates of lack of justice in many spheres of my life. That then projected in my taking an opportunity to do research using gender as a framework even though I was not quite a student of gender or women's studies. At masters level where I was a student of Science Education and Development I engaged the gender lens to investigate the absence of women and girls from science and technology. The debates I engaged in challenged the socio cultural, administrative, curriculum and pedagogical assumptions and decisions on what subjects are relevant for what gender. The literature I got hold of opened to me many truths or realities I had not been exposed to in written form but some of which I had observed. The

literature together with personal experience assisted in production of dissertation which was part fulfillment for MSc. in the faculty of Education and Community Studies at the University of Reading. After this I took every opportunity to participate formally and informally in gender activities within my country. The participation gave me an opportunity to attend workshops and conferences that dealt with the subject.

The field of agricultural education emphasized the imbalances of power between men and women. In addition, the development component of my studies exposed the imbalances between countries within the global context. For the first time I engaged in debates where I could question the assumed nature and benefits of development as an accepted framework. I got opportunity to also have my own ways of defining and reallocating some of the accepted ways of saying and doing. And I learned that issues and state relationships are not as neutral and innocent as they are mapped to be.

I applied to do a doctorate with the then University of Durban Westville that was to become part of the University of KwaZulu Natal. I applied and admitted to proceed with science education. As I began to attend sharing seminars, one of the supervisors shared her study in which she engaged Feminist Frameworks. As she shared, I immediately connected with her and I decided there and then that I had to change my proposal to engage with what for me felt comfortable and meaningful. I read intensely on feminism and subscribed to many networks in the field as a professional undertaking.

Then I changed direction to investigate schools in an area that had always interested me which is management of young women's pregnancy. The view of schools in the manner allowed me to research other institutions such as church, family and community in issues of sexuality of women and young women in particular. The topic was of interest to me because I had personal experience of being a pregnant young woman. The kind of talk I had listened to and materials I had read did not resonate with my personal experience and experiences of some of the women in the category whom I had come to share with. It was important for me to find a space that values personal experience as valid data. I found a home for myself and my thoughts within feminism. Even as I started out I did not classify myself as feminist but all actions and ways of engaging in my life have decided for me the space within feminism. The discovery is making me comfortable with feminism.

I complete my doctoral studies as an employee of a management institute. My working in this space has presented me with teaching in the areas of Gender HIV and AIDS, gender Mainstreaming and others. My engagements with feminism are evident in the way I approach and analyze all aspects of my teaching. The status has filtered to my engagements with my community where I take every opportunity to share my views.

The interest has led me to more networks and I participate in many forums where feminism and research feature. The area of interest to me is currently on religion, sexuality, violence, HIV and AIDS and culture. I love to engage in more research, write and publish and also to acquire more skills with intent to sharing with others. My desire would be to be part of an institution that allows and supports research, training or teaching and other hands on practices in the area of women or gender studies.

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The African Gender Institute is a research grouping within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town University of Cape Town

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