

African Feminism

By Rudo B. Gaidzanwa

The concepts of ‘Africa’ and ‘feminism’ have generated debate as different scholars of varying theoretical and ideological persuasions and of different classes, races, cultures and experiences have contested the meanings of these concepts and descriptions. Africa is a geographical concept, connoting and uniting peoples who share the continent as a location for living and working. The continent is varied in terms of the peoples who inhabit it, ranging from the Arab-speaking (predominantly Muslim) countries north of the Sahara to the peoples living south of the Sahara (formerly colonised by the French, British, Portuguese and Germans and other nationalities).

Women whose ancestry derives from Africa but are located in other parts of the world may also identify themselves as Africans. This applies to women in the United States of America, whose ancestors were enslaved by Europeans. The identity of African is also adopted by Caucasians, including women, who have been born and bred in various parts of Africa even though their ancestors may have originated elsewhere.

Most of Africa has been subjected to imperialism and has fought hard for liberation. Within these anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, modern strands of feminism in Africa have emerged and developed strong movements focusing on the assertion of the rights of women. According to Richards (1980), feminism focuses on the systematic economic injustices that women experience owing to their sex, while Oakley (1981) suggests that feminism is about putting women first, prioritising their interests and representing those interests in every sphere of life. For Smith (1982), feminism is the political theory and practice that seeks to free women of all colours, classes, abilities, sexual orientations and ages from all forms of oppression. Feminism is political, seeking to influence, shape and exercise a degree of power over events in order to further the interests of different types of women.

African feminism?

A wide variety of feminist strands – informed by race, class, age, sexual orientation, culture and other identities – exists within and outside Africa today.

In Africa, modern feminism is rather complex. It has many manifestations and expressions, and so it is not possible to refer to a single ‘African feminism’. One strand – active in the academic arena and reacting to the devaluation and misrepresentations of various African cultures and traditions by colonialists – focused on re-capturing and re-valourising African traditions and cultures by writing about famous and powerful African women such as Nehanda of Zimbabwe, Nongqawuse of the Xhosa, and Nzinga of Angola, to mention just a few of the famous women of southern Africa. There are others in the rest of Africa whose lives have been documented and whose exploits have been held up as examples of women’s agency prior to colonisation. Similarly, specific practices such as “sitting on a man”, described by Van Allen (1972) and the Women’s War of 1929 in colonial Nigeria, described by Ifeka-Moller (1975), represent alternative interpretations of events relating to colonial encounters in Africa. This type of feminist activism in academia was criticised by Marxists – both nationalist and feminist – for focusing on women of the ruling or powerful classes, who have often benefited from the oppression of less privileged women in specific African societies and historical locations within which African cultures, customs and traditions were dismissed as barbaric or oppressive of women by the colonial populations. In Zimbabwe the empire of Great Zimbabwe, with its remains in Masvingo, is constantly used to demonstrate the existence of a glorious African past. However, the problematic issue of the use of women’s labour to climb up the steep hill carrying water, firewood and other provisions necessary for the conduct of everyday life, and

the possibility of human sacrifices in the Munhumutapa court, are not so comfortably discussed.

Another strand of feminism, influenced by Marxism within liberation movements and political parties of the 1960s and 1970s, focused on advancing women's interests through the political arena, drawing on women who were linked to political parties bent on capturing state power. This strand of feminism – born of women's participation in the liberation struggles of Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and South Africa, among many other countries – was strengthened by the post-conflict marginalisation of women and poor war veterans, most of whom found themselves excluded from post-colonial armies, employment and the economy because of their poor education and lack of links to the liberation elites. In most countries, a significant proportion of the women who achieved high positions in parliament, the civil service, the private sector and other areas after liberation were the wives, sisters, daughters, relatives and friends of male members of the liberation elites. Often, such women had pursued tertiary education while the poorer women had fought on the war front.

These post-liberation developments have influenced other feminists in Africa, many of whom have been critical of the gender dynamics of male-dominated militarised liberation movements and political parties, and have preferred activism in churches, trade unions, academia and other locations (Essof: 2005). Feminism that has focused on capturing power and influence primarily within the state has, at times, proved to be limited because of the problems of maintaining linkages and operating within formal and exclusionary bureaucracies, influenced and run by functionaries experienced in working through male-dominated and gender-insensitive political parties and movements. These bureaucracies typically respond very slowly to direct demands by poor women and communities and also often diminish the positive impacts and efforts of women in state bureaucracies by separating them from their support base – i.e. the poor women and communities who could have catapulted them into positions of influence and responsibility (Hassim: 2005).

Feminism in Africa and the movements it has generated have often been subjected to an internal critique for raising the issue of women's lack of power and criticising men's dominance in public life, the economy, politics and society. Criticisms of feminism in Africa were undertaken by Marxist and other organisations and movements, which often labelled feminism 'diversionary', 'un-African'

and 'Western-inspired'. This occurred when various tendencies within feminism in Africa raised issues relating to customs and traditions that undermine African women's land and property rights; violence against women in public and private spaces; and gender-based inequalities in education, health, economic and political power. Nationalist critiques of colonialism often focused on defending African cultures, values and practices. Sometimes this created conflicts and dilemmas for individual African feminists, some of whom were actively opposed to the nationalist narratives in defence of African cultures and traditions. A good example of this trend is Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, in which he defended the practice of female genital cutting. Kenyatta's analysis and justification of the practice created conflicts for those African feminist nationalists who were against both colonialism and female genital cutting. Despite the lack of discomfort among African nationalists in using Western political theorists such as Marx and Engels, they were reluctant to recognise the right of African women to borrow from Western bodies of social and political knowledge to pursue and justify their causes and rights. At a time when solidarity among nationalists was necessary, some feminists in Africa were silenced – or had their critiques of female genital cutting muted – because of the imperatives of solidarity within the ranks of the nationalists. As indicated by Narayan (1997) in her discussion of Third World feminist politics, other social changes that have occurred – the contestations and struggles against imperialism and their modern manifestations and symbols – have not been subjected to the same label of 'Westernisation'. The agendas of mainstream nationalism were sometimes very anti-feminist, but were masked and defended as processes of cultural preservation (Ibid).

The development of feminism has been problematic within Africa particularly with respect to issues such as female genital cutting and violence against women through honour killings in parts of North Africa – issues that were picked up by Western feminists of different ideological inclinations. This issue was very uncomfortable because of the ways in which these practices were theorised and described in the West, without any connections being made to the forms of gender-based violence and femicides in the United States of America and other Western countries. Elements of these contestations continue to dominate the agenda of human rights in France, Britain, the Netherlands and other countries in Europe, this time around the question of the apparel of Muslim women.



Attempts to control women's sexuality in Africa, through the use of women held to embody what is best about the 'nations' that were being built after colonialism had been overthrown, remain problematic. Women's dress, their movements, education and health are critical areas of concern because they are more strictly policed than those of men, who have adopted Western dress such as suits, long-sleeved shirts, ties and closed shoes, apparel that is inappropriate in hot, humid countries with limited water for washing clothes. The contestations around women's sexuality have often had to be couched in terms of women's health and reproductive rights, rather than the right of women to express, shape and explore desire and sexuality on the same terms as men.

In Africa, young women who espouse different types of feminism often collide with men of their own age, and also with older men, older women and others, over issues of dress, food and other everyday aspects of life. In South Africa, the murders of women with HIV in KwaZulu-Natal and other areas raised public opprobrium. At the same time, the rapes and murders of lesbians in South Africa and the laws against homosexuality in Uganda and other African countries indicate continuing problems with the public discussion of expressions of sexuality on the continent. Despite the open and very public (as well as covert) expressions of homosexuality in Africa, and the benign tolerance of homosexuality in

some Muslim communities in Mombasa, there is still very little open and tolerant discussion of various sexualities and sexual possibilities in Africa. There is silencing of the debates around sexuality, as has occurred in Zimbabwe through President Mugabe's epithets against homosexuals, whom he likened to "pigs and dogs". Various African politicians, such as Museveni of Uganda, Nujoma of Namibia and Mugabe of Zimbabwe, have argued that homosexuality is 'un-African'. The predominant mode of dealing with this issue, like that of women's rights, has been to label any uncomfortable practice 'Western' as a way of delegitimising it, silencing the discussion and – in Uganda and Zimbabwe – criminalising homosexuality. Regardless of the dilemmas of homosexuals, their families, parents, relatives and the public who might appreciate more nuanced information and debate about homosexuality, its social and biological origins, modes of expression and meanings, little headway has been made except in South Africa, where there is a vibrant homosexual movement even if its members are sometimes subjected to various forms of physical and psychological violence. Many homosexuals and their families in Africa are frequently at a loss about how to relate to each other because of the stigmatisation of homosexuality; the refusal to discuss it openly and rationally; and the failure to understand the ways in which homosexuals perceive themselves, their lives and their conflicts in hetero-normative societies.

In Africa, where the predominant form of infection is through sex, issues of homosexuality are closely tied to issues of HIV and AIDS. Discomfort with discussions of sex and sexuality was partly responsible for the rapid spread of HIV, the high mortality from AIDS, and the present problems HIV and AIDS pose for Africa's development. Feminists in Africa have taken various positions on these issues. These dilemmas and conflicts were also evident in the relationships between a number of liberal feminists in various Western locations and feminists of African ancestry and African location. Smith (1982) exemplified the strand of African-American feminism that was alienated by the feminism of women who had little or no experience of poverty, marginality, colour-based discrimination or disempowerment.

Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and other African-American feminists have written about the tensions within the civil rights movement of black people in the United States. African-American feminists who raised the issues of gender-based discrimination within the civil rights movement were labelled 'disloyal'. The oft-quoted quip by Stokely

Carmichael, in which he referred to the position of women in the civil rights movement as “prone”, exemplifies and illustrates the tensions between African-American feminist perspectives and those of male-dominated African-American human rights movements and activism.

The emergence of global forums focusing on women’s and gender issues has galvanised and internationalised the issues raised by African feminists, within and outside Africa. Tripp (2005) and Wanyeki (2005) have spoken of continental and international treaties, bodies and organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union and other entities as critical in forging international linkages between African women’s movements and feminists and other activists throughout the world. Tripp argues that African regional discussions, norms, ideas, practices and strategies have been key in influencing national policies and movements in Africa. The emergence of multi-party politics has expanded the political spaces available to feminists in Africa, encouraging a variety of organisations to become active in building local, regional and international networks linked to transnational organisations such as the United Nations and to new communications technologies (email, the Internet and cellular phones). In countries such as South Africa, which achieved national liberation after the emergence and strengthening of transnational feminism, the strides made by women in public life, political representation and activism indicate the influence of global and regional feminist movements in advancing the agenda of women of varying political, ideological and social stripes. More recently, Rwandese women have (after the genocide) used the post-conflict phase to mobilise for peace-building and to advance women’s political, social and economic power. Rwanda is now the country in the world with the highest proportion of women in parliament.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is evident that the varying strands of modern African feminism have been instrumental in shifting the terrain of political, social and economic struggle in Africa, bringing together the issues of the public and private domains to move forward the agenda of human rights on the continent. The internationalisation of the issue of rape in conflict situations is partly the result of the work of women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and other countries in Africa where feminists have campaigned to bring rape to the fore in highlighting issues, and punishing violators, of human rights, particularly those relating to women. Hopefully, the discussion

of rape as a weapon of war and of women as victims of male violence during conflicts will lead to broader debates about sexuality and about issues of control over women’s bodies.

The growing regionalisation of blocs globally will hasten the process of influencing states to institutionalise women’s rights as we have seen with the signing of the SADC Protocol on women’s rights. While necessary, this may not be sufficient to realise African women’s rights fully, because of the inequalities in economic, social and political standing between men and women, among women, and between ethnicities, classes, ages, and races in Africa. While formal gender representation may well reach equality in a growing number of countries in Africa, a long agenda faces African feminists as they seek to address and advocate for economic, political and social equality within and between specific states, and among social, ethnic, racial, gender and economic groups on the continent. ■

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