

## Editorial

### Amina Mama

Women all over Africa organise themselves to pursue their social, cultural, political and economic interests. The now substantial body of feminist-inspired historiography on women's struggles during the colonial period indicates unequivocally that they have often mobilised and resisted as women, in order to pursue interests they had defined for themselves, and that they began to do so long before modern feminism came into being.

Historians continue to unearth far earlier examples of women's scholarly and philanthropic work as well, thus extending the conceptual boundaries of modern feminist thought. At popular level, for example, local Nigerian communities mythologise medieval scholarly and military icons such as Nana Asmau and Amina of Zazzau; in Morocco, Fatima bint Mohammed ben Feheri is remembered as the well-travelled philanthropist who founded the ancient University of Al-Qarawiyyin at Fez, Morocco, in the year 859.

These ancient legacies have more than poetic value. They serve to inspire contemporary intellectual work and political mobilisations, pointing to modes of agency and activism that lie outside the narrow frames of modern political analysis and liberal democratic assumptions. They suggest that women on the African continent did not derive their liberatory impulses from those eccentric and well-intentioned Western women who travelled South to educate and uplift us. Indeed, it might be worth considering the reverse possibility: that African women's various actions may well have served to inspire European and North American women, and so contributed to the genesis of modern feminism. The journals and life-stories of the women who fled the strictures of Victorian patriarchy to become travellers and missionaries does suggest that they may have taken to the seas in pursuit of some degree of personal freedom, in lands where corsets and petticoats had never been heard of, and where women played substantive roles in the economic and cultural lives of their communities.

Later, when the anti-colonial struggles took shape, the fact that women actively joined and fought for various African liberation movements was regarded as indicative of the progressive character of African nationalism, as it did not reflect indigenous cultural legacies. It has fallen to African feminist researchers grounded in more critical and historical understandings of modern nationalism to re-examine these struggles, and to problematise the deeply gendered features of colonial rule and the resistance it generated. Such critical feminist perspectives offer incisive conceptual tools for analysing the complex and contradictory dynamics of contemporary states and political cultures that, more often than not, now serve as bastions of patriarchal authoritarianism.

This issue of *Feminist Africa 4: Women Mobilised* presents new theorisations of postcolonial gender politics. The contributors document and critically reflect on contemporary gender struggles in a number of key arenas. Needless to say, for every example that is discussed in the following pages, many more have been omitted, about which a few points are worth noting.

The first is that the diverse mobilisations occurring around sexuality are not directly addressed in this issue. This is not because we concur with the reluctance that many African women's movements display towards matters of sexuality. On the contrary, we hold the view that struggles over gender-based violence, trafficking in women, sex work, sexual orientation and sexual pleasure lie at the centre of feminism. It is our view, however, that the deeply heteronormative character of most women's movements in Africa has effectively constrained our engagement with sexuality and sexual politics, and that this has prevented the

emergence of more radically transformative politics.

Problematising our engagement with sexuality and sexual politics makes us aware that mobilisations in this arena have largely been confined within discourses on gender-based violence, sexual health and reproductive rights. This focus has not been unsuccessful. It has proved to be politically strategic and productive in terms of effecting much-needed changes in laws and policies, legitimising demands for welfare service provision, and even at extending the boundaries of citizenship somewhat. However, it has also operated to reinscribe women in their reproductive roles, locating them within a “care economy” that underpins patriarchal capitalist political economy. This conceptualisation, although based on good materialist analysis, does not fully sabotage or challenge the gender assumptions of mainstream political economy. The discourses that continue to position women-as-mothers-and-wives also uphold a particular moral order, one which has constrained the sexual choices and preferences of women, and left little space for women's erotic pleasure to be countenanced, let alone developed into a creative cultural space.

Women in Africa have dedicated significant energy and effort to challenging the various manifestations of gender-based violence within and beyond notions of “African culture”. However, we must ask to what extent these movements – which must be commended for having offered refuge and temporary assistance to thousands of abused women all over the continent – have in fact successfully addressed the rootedness of abuse in patriarchal power relations. To what extent have legal, policy and service provisions challenged a social and economic order that depends on continuing to position women's interests as subordinate to the economic, cultural and psychosexual satisfactions of men?

On the global front too, it has become clear that in the post-9/11 world, sexual politics – and the morality that underpins dominant discourses on sexuality – can no longer be relegated to the periphery of feminist analysis. At the international Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March 2005, the global women's movement saw the convergence of interests between the White House, the House of Fahd and the Vatican once again seize the stage. This “alliance of fundamentalisms” was confronted by a global women's movement determined to hold the line, and to maintain the gains in basic sexual and reproductive rights inscribed ten years ago, in the Beijing Platform. African women, notably the South African official delegation, played a key role in staving off the US-led backlash. Of course, this will not prevent the Bush administration from deploying its global influence to restrict women's access to contraception and safe abortion, to block sexuality education work, and hold back the disbursement of condoms. It will not prevent the US government from withdrawing funding for the provision of basic family planning services. However, had these deadly manoeuvres not been defeated, women around the world, but especially those with the least resources, would have found themselves pushed backwards into a world where the prevention of pregnancy relies on male sexual restraint, and women's exercise of reproductive choice remains at best a hazardous business. The social and economic consequences of this hardly need to be spelled out – they are still being lived in all those areas of Africa where women and pubescent girls do not have access to any such facilities, to social protection, or to decent antenatal and maternity care.

In recognition of the importance of sexuality as a key arena of feminist scholarship and activism within African, *Feminist Africa* 5 and 6 will present new research and theorising on sexuality by continentally-based scholars who take African sexual struggles, economies and cultures seriously.

The mobilisations that are addressed in this issue continue the reworking of the meaning of both “politics” and “activism”. The three feature articles retain a focus on the state and civil society, but the analyses they present push the boundaries of both, and challenge the

counter-position of the two that has characterised conventional political theory. They map out the complex interplay and contestations between gender activism within the organs of the state and ruling political parties, and more broadly located women's movements. Shireen Hassim's discussion of the changing form of women's mobilisation in post-apartheid South Africa, and Shereen Essof's discussion of the emergence of coalition politics in Zimbabwe both draw our attention to the play of forces in two very different national scenarios. In the South African case, Hassim reveals that effective activism relies on delicate, often personal relationships between activists located within African National Congress government structures, and at various levels of the society (something that Amanda Gouws also drew our attention to in *Feminist Africa 3*). Essof shows how the crisis of the Zimbabwean state generated new political opportunities for women on the national stage, enabling the women's movement to extend its influence to an unprecedented degree, only to find itself overextended as the national crisis deepened.

The emergence of coalition strategies is further explored in *In Conversation*. This section includes a detailed recording of the remarkable experience of the Ghanaian Women's Manifesto Coalition, which illustrates the effectiveness of coalition-building under a different set of political circumstances – those of a multiparty democratic system, complete with inter-party contestations over the women question. In this case, a strong women's movement has generated an unprecedented level of mobilisation across Ghanaian state and society.

Aili Mari Tripp's feature article attends to transnational mobilisations at continental and global level, confirming the growing presence of African women at global forums, and documenting the development of pan-continental organising. The challenges faced at this level of activism are further explored by Muthoni Wanyeki in her profile of FEMNET. Wanyeki's discussion highlights the complex challenges that have dogged almost all pan-African organisations, but which have yet to be subjected to critical reflection and analysis. These include the contentions between regions with disparate colonial political legacies, the linguistic rivalries between so-called “Anglophone” and “Francophone” territories, the separateness of the Arabic-speaking North, and the relative neglect of the Portuguese-speaking nations to the South and West of the continent. These disparities have played out – sometimes at great cost – in all pan-African bodies, despite their strategic importance. However, while it can be argued that interstate structures are little better than their constituent members (and all except the women's organisations among them have been dominated by men), the fact is that even the most visionary and progressive of our NGOs and scholarly networks (for example CODESRIA, OSSREA, SAPES) have been severely tested by these challenges. On the other hand, the feminist pan-African networks, because of their interest in more holistic transformations, might just offer some of the first substantive efforts to develop democratic modes of organisation that reflect on and engage with the challenges of our historical, political, economic and cultural diversities.

The experiences of women's networks show additional challenges arising from the uneven levels of development among women's movements across the continent. This has meant that pan-continental mobilisation has struggled to be properly and evenly representative across and within nations that have remained deeply divided between urban and rural locations, and socially stratified along class, ethnic and religious lines, as well as by gender inequalities.

One of the most exciting innovations seen in recent mobilisations has been the way women all over Africa have seized upon the latest developments in technology to pursue feminist agendas. In a region characterised by poor communication infrastructure and lack of access to libraries, books, print and electronic media, this may not be surprising. A mere 20 years ago, sending an invitation to a conference, an air-ticket or a research report across this continent meant paying a minimum of US\$50 to a courier firm, only for many of these

precious packages to disappear off the face of the earth! Few women's organisations could afford to communicate regularly within nations, let alone across the continent. It is still easier to telephone London or New York, still cheaper to call home to Africa from much of Europe and North America, than to place a call from Dakar to Lagos. So the advent of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the Internet have dramatically changed the possibilities for networking and knowledge-sharing of all kinds.

Africa's feminists have lost no time in grasping the challenge and potential afforded by ICTs. Both the emergence of new networks, and the uptake of ICTs by existing organisations have not only been extremely rapid, they have also been characterised by a level of improvisation that demonstrates the remarkably creative organisational and strategic capacity of feminism in Africa. The African Gender Institute, FEMNET and ABANTU for Development all make extensive use of ICTs and the Internet. Feminist Africa itself is a direct result of the African Gender Institute's ongoing experimentation with new technologies. This has been stimulated by a deep appreciation of the costs of isolation, and ongoing experimentation that seeks to make maximum use of the Internet and communications technology to develop a vibrant feminist intellectual and activist community in spite of the digital divide, and in fact, to overcome it.

Jennifer Radloff's profile of the Association for Progressive Communications, Africa-Women (APC-AAW), the African regional body within the global Association for Progressive Communication's Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP), demonstrates that this uptake has been deeply informed by African women's interests in overcoming the disparities and marginalisations emanating from unequal access to information and knowledge. The capacity-building work of such dedicated ICT networks and groups has worked to empower women's groups, feminist advocacy, and documentation and research centres, creating new levels and senses of community and collaboration.

This is exemplified in the inspiring interview with veteran feminist activist, Fatma Alloo of the Tanzania Media Women's Association. The stories she tells illustrate just how innovatively and creatively Tanzanian women activists have engaged with the new communications technologies that came their way, using them across a range of mediums and as powerful tools in the struggle for women's rights.

The challenges of transnationalism are the subject of Elaine Salo's standpoint article. Raising the challenges posed by new global elite formations, she suggests that feminist mobilisations can no longer look to the nation-state as the sole framework for political activism. In so doing, she offers us a post-nationalist frame of analysis that takes on board transnational elite-formation, as well as more popular anti-globalisation movements. This kind of perspective may prove indispensable to feminist strategy in the context of globalisation, something that Marnia Lazreg also called for in the standpoint piece she offered in *Feminist Africa 3*. What do transnationalism and transnational feminism mean for the disparate communities of women populating the African continent? Do these simply present further opportunities for the new well-heeled and well-travelled feminist elite, or are there more radical possibilities – for collaborations further down the social class scale? We hope that African debates will develop around these and related questions.

These contributions variously show that while women are right to be deeply sceptical of the extent to which the patriarchal nation-state can support the liberation of women, feminists are nonetheless continually engaging with the state, demanding rights as citizens in ways that continuously push for redefinitions of the political, and of citizenship, and of culture. African women are not only demanding representation within the formal political arena; they are also challenging the manifestations of patriarchal power relations in all aspects of our lives and social institutions.

Feminists have often preferred to work outside state bureaucracies and party machines, concentrating their efforts at community level. This accumulated experience of community activism has left us with few illusions about civil society, rural transformations, or traditional systems of governance. African women's ongoing experience in all these spheres has been, at the very least, cautionary. We have witnessed first-hand the deep conservatism of many of Africa's local cultures and production systems, and the deeply pervasive impact of capitalist development at even the most peripheral of locations. Today, as in the past, African women participate in mass mobilisations around landlessness, homelessness, poverty and HIV/AIDS. Rural women, poor urban women and young women are often on the frontlines of today's mass protests. The number of women's organisations pursuing popular struggles has grown, and there is also a more general increase in the extent to which women are presented as the face of mainstream movements. It is not at all clear that this new tendency to "front" women in protests and media campaigns actually translates into more equitable gender politics within these movements and organisations, or into any deeper cultural changes. In fact, there are disturbing indications that the converse may be true within some of these structures, but we have not been able to explore the gender politics of mixed or male-led social movements and mobilisations in this issue.

The cultural arena has long been a key site of feminist intervention in Africa. Cultural repression – often in the name of tradition – has in turn generated cultural resistance, inspiring the creative spirits among us to engage in exciting and inventive modes of cultural activism that seek to transform popular attitudes and values.

The Mothertongue Project profiled in this issue exemplifies the methodological and performative possibilities of feminist theatre. In a completely different genre – that of lone poet – the award-winning work of Gabeba Baderoon, reviewed here by Harry Garuba, is also presented as a mode of cultural activism – one which subverts received aesthetic and perceptual frames, effortlessly encompassing Islamic and non-Islamic worlds, and re-inscribing understandings of masculinity, identity and women's particular experiences of love and loss.

Yaba Badoe's report on the Ougadougou Film Festival points to a third site of cultural activism, in which women's presence, feminist or not, offers something qualitatively and radically different to those who take film seriously.

In keeping with Feminist Africa's commitment to celebrating those who have left our ranks and joined the ancestors, Yvonne Vera's profoundly sensitive intellectual legacy is celebrated in Desiree Lewis' tribute to her work and ideas. In concentrating on what Vera achieved in her all-too-short life, Lewis takes us beyond our sense of loss, into the realm of a collective cultural life that outlives any individual and continues to inspire us. Helen Scanlon pays tribute to the late Ray Alexander, whose lifetime of struggle not only spanned the entire duration of apartheid, but stretched across the disparate demands of the domestic and public spaces that women activists still often inhabit, extending them to their very limits. May her legacy live on in all those who resist.

Today, all manner of forces seek to mobilise women in various capacities – as the poorest of the poor, as mothers and wives, as party supporters, and as community service-providers. The orchestration of women's lives and activism by disparate local and international interests demands a new level of vigilance.

For some African women, a transition to democratic party politics has opened up new spaces. Multipartyism now poses new strategic challenges, as political parties vie for credibility, often deploying women to legitimise agendas that are unlikely to advance

women's interests. For others, dictatorial regimes continue to hold sway, mounting attacks on the populace that often target women more or less directly. Throughout much of the continent, the abdication of public responsibility to “market forces” is posing its own limits on public accountability, and so undermining the efficacy of state-focused activism.

African women have also become increasingly assertive on the international landscape; our collective interests are better articulated, and our presence is less dispensable to the global women's movement at the various transnational and international conferences and forums. African women's organisations are also becoming more adept at mobilising international resources from donors, increasingly on their own terms.

Contemporary feminist analysis must take cognisance of the fact that many of today's mobilisations of women do not seek to advance feminist agendas of any kind. Under the new democratic dispensations, things have become a little more complicated. Party politics pose their own challenges to autonomous women's mobilisation. In addition, neoliberal economic paradigms see international funding threaten to reconfigure many women's groups into service-providers; increasingly, women are being conscripted as footsoldiers of social adjustment, forced to labour unwaged to plug the holes left in the social fabric by the externally imposed retraction and subsequent collapse of public services. This tendency of social adjustment to absorb women's work and energy threatens to mitigate against the emerging militancy of mobilisations of women that seek to call governments back from the ruthless clutches of international financial agencies, to account to those that elected them.

Read on, reflect more, strategise further, and above all, mobilise!

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*Amina Mama is Chair in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town.*