

In Conversation

Mobilising Tanzania's Women: Joanne Henry Interviews Fatma Alloo

Fatma Alloo has a wide and impressive list of achievements. One of the most noteworthy is her role as a founder member of TAMWA, the Tanzania Media Women's Association, one of Africa's leading feminist organisations. Her personal accomplishments include her winning the MNET award in 1999 for her documentary on khanga cloth, and her leadership roles in both the Zanzibar International Film Festival and Zanzibar Women on the Net (ZaWoN).

Joanne Henry: What events in your personal life influenced you to become a “social movement activist”?

Fatma Alloo: I first began establishing Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) in 1987 in Dar es Salaam at national level. This was the beginning of my activism. At that time, all we were doing was creating a space for our voices. Being in media, we consciously chose this medium to highlight gender issues and engage in advocacy work for women's rights.

On a more personal level, I had just come out of a very painful relationship. I had believed that just because the man had lectured at the University of Dar es Salaam on women's rights as human rights, he would be a good companion to have. Little did I know that tackling the culture of feudalism deeply ingrained in patriarchal behaviour would be such a daunting task.

Then, at work, we began to notice the same patterns of patriarchal behaviour when it came to training, or even what stories to cover. As women journalists, we were only ever given health issues and women's issues to cover. All the top posts were given to male colleagues, even when some of us women had more experience. We had each taken different journeys, but in the end, the fact that we should be second-class citizens just because of our gender began to be unacceptable to us.

JH: How did you come to take feminism seriously and identify yourself as a feminist activist?

FA: When TAMWA began, we started to publish our own magazine and did radio programmes from our perspective. We began to look into issues of violence against women. We began to question this violence in the home. We began to talk about sexual harassment in the streets and in workplaces. We began to talk about the fact that in schools, girls were being dismissed because of pregnancies, yet the male teachers involved and others who picked on the girls got off scot-free. We began to give legal literacy programmes. What happened was that the women who followed our programmes pushed us into activism. They asked us: so what if I know my rights? Where do I go when I face violence in the home? These questions pushed us in TAMWA to establish the Crisis Centre in Dar es Salaam in a working-class area. The Centre is in Msichoke Street, and the name Msichoke means “do not tire”. We find this significant.

JH: How did TAMWA come to be in existence? And what is the vision of the organisation?

FA: TAMWA was formed after the proceedings of the United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985. This conference emphasised the importance of women's mobilisation in addressing the source of women's subjugation to patriarchal norms and in working towards transformation on this front. TAMWA came into existence through our own histories of pain, and the realisation that unless we got together and did something, nothing would change in a patriarchal system. We felt that the coverage in the media – of which we were part and parcel as journalists – needed our voices and analysis from our perspective. As journalists, we also travelled our own paths in terms of personal histories in the home. These are the pangs that birthed TAMWA.

When TAMWA birthed, Tanzania had one government newspaper, one party paper and one government-controlled radio station. At that time there was no television on the mainland.

Even then we felt that not enough was being done on the women front. All journalistic training was going to the men. Men got to cover the “important” news and we were given news of health and home and fashion, et cetera, to cover. Basically we were not satisfied with the patriarchal structures that we were subjected to in workplaces, with male bosses at the head. Mind you, we were able to remove some adverts – the kind that equated a woman to a car or good living, and so forth.

In TAMWA we decided to publish our own mouthpiece called Sauti ya Siti, which means “Voice of Women”. The first editorial made it very clear that we stood for justice and human rights, and would go miles to make sure our society achieved these.

JH: As a founder member of TAMWA, what particular role did you take in forming and developing the organisation?

FA: My role was that of co-ordinating and facilitating debates and forums for TAMWA. I also played the role of a visionary, and did the editorials of Sauti ya Siti magazine, which we published quarterly in English and Kiswahili, with a circulation of 10 000 copies.

JH: Tell us about the structure and programmes of TAMWA.

FA: When we first started, TAMWA was a voluntary organisation. We were 12 women and we all worked on a voluntary basis. I had a job then with the Canadian University Service Organisation (CUSO) [1] as a programme officer, and TAMWA was my voluntary activity. It grew and grew and basically consumed me for eight years. It took our full commitment to work as a collective to put issues in the media and do outreach work and just toil to get it going. Initially we had the magazine, then came the Crisis Centre, then came 16 Days of Activism, then came many more things. The structure grew as we learnt how to organise and be heard.

JH: What were the challenges in growing an organisation like TAMWA? What principles informed its growth and development and shaped the organisational culture?

FA: Challenges were many, but I think what carried us through was the dream of a better world and the fact that we were creating it together. We debated, we supported each other, we challenged the donor community to join hands with us and not just to hand out to us. For example, I remember discussing with donors who wanted to support us that it was important that they buy us a house rather than paying our rent for two years. I told them that as women, we do not feel secure if we do not have a roof over our heads. This is how we got our office premises, and they are still standing today!

The other challenge was training in technology. As TAMWA, we had decided we must take the bull by the horns and make it do what we wanted. We were interested in computers and desktop publishing, but we did not know how to use these technologies. Instead of agreeing to ask someone out there to do it for us, we argued that training for Tamwanites was crucial if women were to make a difference in the technological world. And we did!

JH: One of the strategies of TAMWA has been the distribution of popular education materials. What sort of impact has this had, especially in the more rural areas?

FA: Yes, TAMWA published booklets on issues such as rape and domestic violence to

inform people on prevention and what steps to take should these take place, and to explain what the law says. These have raised awareness and helped men and women to realise that there are issues of inequality stemming from patriarchal values. Discussions on law reform began on the issues of land ownership and sexual harassment. Schoolgirls from the countryside began writing to us to tell us they did not want after-hours tuition with male teachers, as that is when they get harassed and even raped in remote areas.

We also began to engage and question members of parliament on radio shows. As a society, we began to understand that as women, we do have some rights and unless we ourselves practice these rights, nobody else will. Society began to engage in these issues, and decision-makers began to hear our voices.

JH: How has the role and portrayal of women in the media changed since TAMWA's existence?

FA: Before, the media used to portray women as homemakers and so on, and women journalists were given few assignments. This is no longer the case. The media itself has changed, as we moved from state- and party-controlled media to private media in 1986. This liberalising gave new impetus to many forms of media, but it also challenges us in terms of how we portray not only women, but society as a whole. So while the portrayal of women has improved, that is not to say that our media does not portray women as sex objects and victims.

JH: How can we effectively use media in Africa in ways that empower rather than perpetuate stereotypes of poverty, need, dependence and violence?

FA: In Africa, we need to create our own images. Once I was agonising over the portrayal of women as sex objects, and a friend of mine, a man, said to me that the only way we could change perceptions was to create our own images. In terms of TAMWA's experience, this has been true. In Africa, we need to create our own images and put them out there at national and international level. This is also why I am presently involved in image-creation through the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) – the Festival of the Dhows.

JH: Yes, you're currently the vice-chairperson and media/development consultant to the Zanzibar International Film Festival. Tell us more about this role and the work of ZIFF in general.

FA: The Festival of the Dhows, [2] which is in its eighth year, raises issues of globalisation and promotes the goal of society living together. The aspect of creating our own images through our histories is the driving force of this festival. It celebrates the cultures of the dhow countries that share the Indian Ocean basin, including those of the African continent, the Gulf states, Iran, India and the Indian Ocean Islands.

The focus of the festival is the international film and video programme. Productions compete for the festival's Dhow Awards. These awards have been named after the dhow, the ancient sea-going trade vessels powered by the monsoon winds, which brought the peoples of the Indian Ocean region together over centuries. The dhows have in fact shaped the collective memory of the region's people and nurtured their identities. Themes of the festival include cultural diversity, individual integrity, social justice, women, children, the diaspora, culture and conservation.

JH: How does this event promote women in the media and women's issues?

FA: We have a women's panorama where we showcase women's stories and our own

heroines, like Bi Kidude – she is now 88 years old and still drumming and singing. We also showcase women's work in the visual and arts and theatre media. We do living history; for example, the story of Princess Salma (who was the first woman to write a historical documentation of life in Zanzibar in the 19th century) and the struggle against the colonialists.

JH: In your experience, what have been the best kinds of media for empowering women on the continent, and why?

FA: The best forms of media are radio, theatre arts and now television. Radio all over Africa is the most powerful medium, as even today, it still has the greatest outreach capacity. In Tanzania, we have a strong tradition of theatre arts and story-telling in almost all areas. Television is more recent. You know, when we started TAMWA, there was no television on the mainland in Tanzania, for we had a leader, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, who believed that a society that cannot create its own images should not be dominated by other images.

JH: That's quite a progressive view. How did former President Nyerere's stance affect the nature and quality of Tanzanian current media images?

FA: He totally rejected the images of “Coca-cola culture” as we know it today, arguing that we could not have media images which would add to the colonisation of our minds. But with present-day neo-liberal policies, this view has been marginalised. However on the Tanzanian mainland, one interesting feature is that the private television stations came in first, four of them. When state television followed them, the challenge was to create interesting programmes and images.

Now we have five TV stations, as well as radios and newspapers, but also we have a strong tradition in Tanzania of theatre arts and traditional story-telling. In my opinion, these are very effective in terms of impacting people's minds.

JH: What are the ways in which traditional media forms sit well with newer media and technologies?

FA: Traditional media in Tanzania has tried to incorporate modern technologies. It has also tried to gain acceptability in the modern sense of making it into a “discipline” at university level. So we have a strong Theatre Arts Faculty at the University of Dar es Salaam and the famous Bagamoyo School of Arts. These produce a lot of young people with skills through the marriage of tradition and the modern ways. They use street theatre, community theatre and film production. These young professionals are also playing their part in social movements in Tanzania.

JH: Tell us more about TAMWA's radio work and its impact in communities.

FA: Since inception, TAMWA has done a lot of work through radio. We have consistently used radio programmes to highlight issues. For example, if we are discussing why there are so many pregnancies in schools, we would do a series of in-depth programmes. These would look at the causes of the problem and explore how big is it, who is involved, what the law says, what society says, and look at solutions suggested by the affected girls themselves.

JH: What feedback do you get from the community after these radio programmes?

FA: Depending on the programme, we generate a lot of interest through radio outreach, especially on issues of violence, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment. Some

callers want to remain anonymous, but many do speak out, particularly in recent years. Our dream is still to have our own radio station – we tried before, but Tanzanian legislation did not permit it. But now with globalisation, we can set up a station, especially community radio, but so far we have not succeeded in doing so due to lack of human and financial resources. The plan is very much there, though.

JH: And what about your television work?

FA: Not much has been done on this front. We have appeared on television intermittently when some issues are covered, and on panel discussions. Sometimes we show the documentaries that we have produced.

JH: Let's move on to talk about the documentary work you have been involved in, and how these have given voice to women's issues.

FA: In TAMWA, we have produced documentaries on women's lives, with the agenda of giving visibility to women's lives. For example, we did a documentary on Sit binti Saad, the first woman communicator (our magazine Sauti ya Siti is named after her). After we made her story visible, she was acclaimed as a national heroine, a hundred years after her death in Zanzibar.

JH: Tell us more about the documentary for which you won the MNET award in 1999.

FA: That documentary was on khanga cloth, a traditional cloth that women wear all along the Tanzanian coast and in Zanzibar. I grew up with it. It is a cloth that speaks in a culture of silence. The documentary went into the history of how this cloth was designed and worn by women, and also how it played a role in the independence struggle. The British outlawed the cloth in colonial Tanganyika, as it had sayings that were mobilising to get rid of colonialism. They imported khangas with Sir Winston Churchill's sayings instead. The women in Tanganyika then boycotted the cloth. At that time, the Indian independence movement had an alliance with the one in Tanganyika. So women would smuggle the designs to India, where the khangas would be printed. Then they would be smuggled back through the underground movement to Tanganyika so that women would have the cloth to wear.

JH: Tell us about the Day of Action, which is organised every year in May. How does this event mobilise the community?

FA: This has been a tradition in TAMWA since its inception. On that day, we pick a topical issue that has hit the press, be it the maternal mortality rate, or rape cases, or death through domestic violence. Topics like these that have hit the press are used to raise awareness and educate the public on laws affecting the issues, as well as raising the issues at policy level.

JH: Have any of these events given rise to other mobilising initiatives?

FA: Yes. Now we have the women lawyers' association, the medical women's association and many others at grassroots level. TAMWA has formed a coalition with many women's organisations – Tanzania Gender Network Project (TGNP), Tanzania Lawyer's Association, and others – to form Feminist Activism (FEMACT). This is the front which women use to take on issues like laws that are detrimental to women. Tanzania has been able to pass laws that impact women in a big way (such as land issues, the Sexual Offences Bill, etc.) even through a male-dominated parliament. This is possible because of the concerted efforts of FEMACT as a body. And sometimes just our presence has an impact. Recently there was a case of young children being sodomised in school by a musician and his three sons. He was rich. The coalition decided to attend all court hearings and let the magistrate know that its

members were present, so that bribes could not change hands and justice could prevail. It did.

JH: Earlier, you mentioned Sauti ya Siti (Voice of Women). How has the publication of this magazine affected the everyday lives of Tanzanian women and men?

FA: In my opinion, Sauti ya Siti played a major role in terms of mobilising society over issues of women. We were the first organisation to talk publicly of sexual harassment at work. Sauti ya Siti was also the first magazine to talk about the plight of domestic workers, who now have an organisation (Domestic Workers' Association, which was established four years back). We addressed topics like prostitution, where we argued that if there is no buyer, then there will be no seller; so responsibility lies with both men and women. Issues like this one and the value of work within the home raised a lot of controversy, but they went on the record. Issues of gender were taken up strongly. Later on, these debates gave birth to other organisations, such as the Tanzania Gender Institute, Kuleana (an organisation for street children in Mwanza) and other organisations.

JH: Tell us about TAMWA's campaign against violence against women, and the impact this has had.

FA: Very soon after TAMWA began issuing the magazine Sauti ya Siti, an incident hit the press: the death of Levina Mukasa (Special Issue, Sauti ya Siti, November 1992). She was a university student who had been facing sexual harassment from male students in the Engineering Department. After six months of harassment, Levina took her own life. This shocked society and jolted us into activism. The public was flabbergasted that such atrocities were going on at the institution of highest learning. They joined us as we marched to the campus to protest her death, and the Punching [3] tradition on the campus was banned.

JH: Tell us about TAMWA's documentation centre.

FA: When TAMWA began, we had a very strong component of research and documentation, and we also used it to build networks and liaise with institutions like the School of Journalism in Tanzania. This was done to build a well-informed, well-linked society. With the birth of the FEMACT coalition, the documentation centre is now hosted at TGNP.

JH: How did the need for TAMWA to be involved in research come about, and what are your areas of focus in terms of research?

FA: When we first began, the need for further research into society was driven by issues like the Levina Mukasa case. Now TAMWA engages in research by collecting data for articles and trends. This research is used by up-and-coming journalists, particularly women, but these days even male journalists take an interest. Some use the data in dissertations for their degrees, and it is also used in feature articles and documentaries. Some members of parliament use our information when they present issues in parliament for debates.

JH: Tell us more about your networking activities and the ICTs that have been used to support them. Also, what challenges did you face as ICT activists?

FA: Our biggest asset is our networking capacity. I believe this is a crucial aspect for effecting change, as it builds a movement. TAMWA initially used the visibility of Sauti ya Siti to mobilise society in Tanzania over issues of women. It did this also internationally through Sauti ya Siti, and through joining campaigns on violence and safe motherhood initiatives and reproductive rights issues.

As for the challenges we had with ICTs, the key element then was not to say “but we do not have technology yet”. I remember at the time we started, hardly anybody knew computers. We were the first NGO to have computers and to produce Sauti ya Siti ourselves using desktop publishing. Also we had e-mail with the support of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). In the early 1990s, they sent Karen Banks to train us with an e-mail modem which is now an antique piece!

Also at that time we would receive e-mail from the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC). I would print it out, and then get it translated and feed it to the media in Tanzania. Also when we went to Vienna for the Human Rights conference in 1992, we had live coverage of what was going on through the radio nodes and telephone connections! As a result we saw the birth of the human rights centre in Dar es Salaam, as people there got mobilised just by listening to what was going on at the Human Rights conference, and by the fact that we were there covering it live. So that generated a lot of healthy debate in the country and in the media.

JH: What has been the most powerful mobilising issue in which ICTs have been instrumental?

FA: Now I think every issue, but the issue of violence against women was most effective in building a movement. The campaign against violence against women really gained ground through technology, and we took that campaign as part and parcel of a global movement to the Vienna conference, where we achieved in getting the sentence “Women's rights are human rights” into the documents.

JH: What influenced your choice of ICTs in the work you did?

FA: Our vision facilitated our choice of ICTs. Initially we chose desktop publishing for production of our magazine. We were fortunate, as we had partners in funding and support with whom we could discuss these issues. I remember we used to demand that they give us the means of production and training for women to use these ICT machines. They did. CODE [4] stands out as one of those organisations that supported us very well.

JH: Has your government been supportive of the deployment of ICTs? What is happening on the policy front where this is concerned, and what impact has this had?

FA: I would say Tanzania has been in the forefront of ICTs in Africa. On the policy front, it is giving it a push, as there is a general recognition of the need to create an information society. We have a website of all our parliamentarians, and the public can reach them this way. We also have an organisation called Tanzania ISP (TISPA), which is a conglomeration of ISP providers in Tanzania that sits with the government on issues of ICTs.

JH: What strategies have TAMWA employed to ensure that women are not disadvantaged with regards to access and use of ICTs? How have you encouraged women to try and use and take ownership of new technologies?

FA: As I said, since its inception, TAMWA has used ICTs and through that, consciousness did emerge within the NGO movement. The other thing you have to remember is that women had traditionally been secretaries. So when the technology changed, they were the ones who knew how to type, and so they had the upper hand in use of computers. Now the men are learning how to type, and taking control of the technology. I would say that in Tanzania, a pattern of male domination in this field has emerged in terms of technicians. Women are scared of technology and it takes us time to get into it. We have to continue to decolonise our minds about this. The young generation is our hope.

JH: You're also a founder member of Zanzibar Women on the Net (ZaWoN). Tell us more about the aims of this body, how it came about, and its work with women and the use of ICTs.

FA: ZaWoN grew out of a workshop held in 1999 to introduce women to computers and the Internet, and to demystify the technology for them. It aims to sensitise women on the use of ICTs for networking, as well as gaining resources and markets for their products. It has a website and women make their own cases on it, and create their niche at global level. It is a slow process, but some are using it effectively. For example, there is a women's group called SASIK, which produces handmade pillow covers as an economic venture. Through ZaWoN, they have been able to supply their products and raise their economic status and thus their level of social engagement.

JH: What makes the work you do meaningful for you?

FA: What makes it meaningful for me is when I see young women coming up and taking their space. When they are willing to lead. When the young argue, we are not the generation of tomorrow, we are the leaders of today. I get inspired when I go to the rural areas and I see a small community-based group that started with nothing now making a huge impact in their little village. You see, I now consult with the Foundation for Civil Society in Tanzania, and my task is to build visionary capacity and assist groups to move beyond what exists today. It takes me throughout Tanzania and I see the impact of our work as small groups come into being.

JH: Just picking up on this, which factors in the Tanzanian women's movement landscape have in your opinion contributed to the current situation in Tanzania?

FA: In Tanzania today, no man laughs in meetings when listening to discussions on women's issues. To me, this is an indicator of the fact that these issues are taken seriously. There is still abuse, of course, but now there is much more awareness of what can be done about it. Before, police stations used to send women back to their homes if they ran there for assistance. No longer. Now they open cases and fill in the P3 [5] form on her arrival. Women have more confidence as they see alternatives; also, as the economic situation worsens, women also have to be fully productive members of society. This gives them economic power and in turn, social power.

In the rural areas though, a lot more work has to be done, as the strong cultural affiliations are much more difficult to penetrate than in the urban centres.

However, having said that, we can see that in Tanzania women have power, but it is still power within the patriarchal structure of society. To become a Minister, for example, one has to take part in the race through patriarchal structures. So the issue of power relations still has to be understood, and women in power have to see the common people as their constituency. The coming election this year will tell us much in terms of women and governance issues. TAMWA and TGNP are heavily involved at the moment in making sure that these issues are brought to the fore in the forthcoming election campaigns.

JH: What are your most memorable moments?

FA: There are many. Times when we launched Sauti ya Siti, where as women we came into being collectively. Times when we had TAMWA's AGM. At last year's one, all these young beautiful women spoke up and stood for elections, ready to take their places and be counted. Times when I see women taking their place in the media technical field, who were

in TAMWA as cubs, seeking their path of development. I can sit back and say the challenges and pain have all been worth it. I have made a difference in my own little way.

JH: What are your plans for the future?

FA: I now want to write, write and write. I have so much experience that now I am ready to reflect upon it in terms of what it tells us about social movements. I want to write in a way that can inspire young women and generations to come.

JH: Thank you very much!

Footnotes

[1] CUSO is a Canadian-based international development organisation.

[2] www.ziff.or.tz

[3] Mzee Punch members, consisting of male engineering students who also posed as a clandestine satire group, would harass female students in an attempt to make them submit to sexual demands, or to force those who achieved academically to perform badly.

[4] CODE is a Canadian charitable organisation that promotes education and literacy in the developing world.

[5] This is a new police form, especially for survivors of gender-based violence.

Fatma Alloo is a founder member of the Tanzania Media Women's Association, and has been a feminist activist in Tanzania for two decades.