African feminism in context: Reflections on the legitimation battles, victories and reversals

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> We define and name ourselves publicly as feminists because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognise that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves feminists places us in a clear ideological position. By naming ourselves as feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multiple and varied identities as African feminists. We are African women – we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with "ifs", "buts" or "howevers". We are Feminists. Full stop.[1]

Over two hundred African feminists sitting in Accra in 2006 developed a Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, seeking to re-energise and reaffirm African feminism in its multiple dimensions. The above preamble to the Charter is an audacious positioning of African feminism as an ideological entity in the African body politic. The charter was collectively crafted as a critical movement-building tool, particularly around the desire to affirm commitment to feminist principles and chart a course to strengthen and grow the feminist movement on the continent. In many ways, the Charter set out to reverse the conservative dynamics that work to undermine the critical edge of African feminism, creating a sense of urgency about the need for the feminist movement to re-assert and re-energise itself. The concerns over de-radicalisation re-ignited my own ongoing reflections as an African feminist, pushing me to reflect on the strides, victories and pitfalls that have arisen as women's movements have pursued a broad politics of legitimation. My reading of the general trajectory of African feminist engagement today

is largely informed by the Ugandan context, even as I identify as an African, in keeping with the pan-African spirit informing the continental feminist movement. My interest here is not merely to recount the diverse experiences on the continent, but rather to establish some key features of the feminist imperative in the African region, progressively permeating the very content of pan-Africanism albeit with varying outcomes across the continent.

Feminism in Africa has been a boiling pot of diverse discourses and courses of action. Far from being constructed in simple opposition to Western feminism, feminism on the African continent constitutes a myriad of heterogeneous experiences and points of departure. In this essay I depart from previous essentialising definitions of "African feminism" that spring from the viewpoint of what it is not. The perspective as advanced by US commentator Gwendolyn Mikell, for example, is that:

> African feminism owes its origin to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. It has largely been shaped by African Women's resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African culture...it does not grow out of bourgeois individualism and the patriarchal control over women within capitalist industrializing societies... The debates in many Western countries about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism are not characteristic of the new African feminism. Rather the slowly emerging African feminism is distinctively heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many "bread, butter, culture, and power" issues (1997: 4).

In the current period such a perspective on feminism in Africa is not only conservative, but does a disservice to the women's movements, and to the generations of women that have been dedicated to pursuing more audacious and radical agendas, especially in the fraught arenas of sexuality, culture and religion. It seems to me that Mikell's outsider definition of "African feminism" actually robs the movement of the critical edge that has—for over three decades now—generated scholarship and activism that speaks to and for the multiplicity of experiences on the continent. Feminism is a myriad of various theoretical perspectives emanating from the complexities and specifics of the different material conditions and identities of women, and informed by the many diverse and creative ways in which we contest power in our private and public lives. In African contexts, feminism is at once philosophical, experiential, and practical. It informs women's-movement political strategy

and practice on the continent, making it a very complex phenomenon to conceptualise. As a movement, feminism in Africa is made up of multiple currents and undercurrents that defy simple, homogenising descriptions.

At the same time, it is possible—and strategically necessary—to re-conceptualise "African feminism" as an ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds. The point of departure here is that the feminist struggle on the African continent represents a critical stance against the mainstream of patriarchal power. Yes, it is necessary to treat feminism as part of the general African body politic, to draw out critical moments of success and effectiveness and, in this way, provide ourselves with a space to theorise and appreciate the transformative changes wrought by feminism in Africa.

The victories of African feminism: Embracing the legitimation question

In the last three decades or so African feminism has seen successive surges of scholarship and activism, and enormous strides have been made in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. Perhaps more than any other social struggles, feminist engagement has been able to lodge a claim within the global political and development discourse (Ahikire 2008). In particular, the 1990s opened a wave of rapid change, with women's movements across the African continent registering gains in various fields; including governance, health, education and domestic relations. In several countries across the continent women's scholarship and activism has made inroads, for example, into constitution-making processes and broadening the public agenda, making the gender question a remarkably public issue.

This reflection is mainly aimed at fleshing out the capillary effects of African feminism, as opposed to a recounting of the different experiences of activism on the ground. My interest specifically lies at the politics generated by African feminism at the level of knowledge legitimation. In many ways, concrete feminist struggles have imbued and shaped societal visions, leading to new imaginings of the African Identity – whether on the continent or in the diaspora. This is what I describe as the capillary effect - understood as a direct product of African feminist engagement on various fronts.

My first point is that victories have been registered at the level of feminist theorisation and knowledge production. Mama (1996) documented the

fact that during the early 1990s women's studies in Africa steadily gained strength, as a growing number of indigenous scholars, women in particular, got involved in studies of gender relations. Her field review indicated that despite the fact that the study of gender relations was still largely dominated by philosophical, theoretical and methodological concerns emanating from Western texts, there was a growing body of work that could be seen to indicate progress in the building of feminist knowledge by and for Africa.

Now, almost two decades later, there exists a substantive body of explicitly feminist research in which radical scholars critically engage Africa's historical conditions and processes of change using gender as a key tool of analysis. Feminist scholarship on and from Africa has made important theoretical contributions to the international fields of both feminist studies and African studies, thereby generating robust and productive engagement with knowledge production in and on Africa (Mama, 2005).

The creation of various institutional spaces for teaching and research on women and gender studies has been a boost for African feminism. Academic units specifically created to advance gender and women's studies have been at the forefront of raising the bar on feminist scholarship on the continent in countries as far apart as Uganda, Cameroon, Ghana, South Africa and Senegal. The African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in particular created a continent-wide space for feminist intellectual life in Africa through a full decade of research, training and academic interventions that include the establishment of the continent's scholarly journal of gender studies, and choosing to explicitly name it *Feminist Africa*. The School of Women and Gender Studies, established as an academic unit at Makerere University in 1991, further illustrates the potential of the field for national university settings. The School has contributed several leaders to the national higher education landscape, and thus both directly and indirectly influenced Uganda's higher education policies and organisational cultures, while generating information that informs university extension work in agriculture and other areas of national policy and development.

Without doubt, the African feminist challenge in the field of knowledge has gained momentum. For example, CODESRIA's all-time bestseller, "Engendering African Social Sciences" was the product of the initial battles for the acceptance of feminist perspectives in a mainstream African social science community that was still strongly resistant to acknowledging its

androcentrism. The editors of that volume took the position that "malestream" social science was illegitimate and biased, or, to put it simply, "men's studies". In her introductory essay, Ayesha Imam (1997) discussed the uphill task that faced feminist scholars at the time, when most of their colleagues had great difficulty comprehending the need to take gender analysis as seriously as class, or other aspects of social stratification and anti-imperialism.

Today there is broader, albeit tacit, agreement in political and educational arenas that gender can no longer be ignored. While there is still resistance and at times overt hostility to feminist work in malestream institutions across the region, feminist critique clearly has much greater legitimacy than it did half a century ago. As Pereira rightly argues in the context of Nigeria, while it was considered 'normal' that intellectual discourse should remain silent on the experiences, concerns and visions of women, or else address these in stereotypical and restricted ways, such a discourse is likely to be challenged today (Pereira, 2004:1). This change is most evident in progressive intellectual circles like the CODESRIA network, in part because it has always had strong feminists among its membership. If African feminists had to argue their case to justify gender analysis in the CODESRIA community of the early 1990s, today the question has shifted from the 'why' question to the 'how' question. In other words, the battle of ideas—at least for the idea of gender as an analytic concept—has largely been won. As a result, there are expanded opportunities for contesting male bias in knowledge legitimation and engaging in gender research. Overall it is clear that feminist interventions have generated a great deal of intellectual ferment, and that this has reached across the disciplines.

The capillary effect of African feminist thought becomes even more apparent when mapped onto the general development arena. Feminist activism has generated the strong presence of the gender discourse in African development arenas. This is evident in the fact that some of feminism's more liberal derivatives—"women in development", "gender equality" and "gender mainstreaming"—have gained legitimacy and become commonplace in most national governmental arenas. For example, the African Union (AU) policy discourse indicates the efficacy of feminist activism. Instruments such as the African Union (AU) Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa—which includes a commitment to 50:50 gender parity in politics—point to the influence of feminism on this continental body. The AU Protocol addresses a range of things, among these: the elimination of discrimination against women,

women's rights to dignity and security of the person, secure livelihoods, health and reproductive rights, social security and protection by the state. The spirit, the language, and the coverage of the Protocol can be understood as a direct result of African feminist interventions. The Protocol did not just come about by itself, as the official archive might well suggest. Rather, it is a product of multiple and sustained feminist engagements with the AU. The Protocol was achieved, not given, and is now actively utilised by the women's movement to demand accountability. The Protocol therefore reflects the world of the possible and normalises the feminist ideal at the very level of societal visions.

As part of the voice from the South generally, feminism coming out of Africa has given more impetus to questions of development and underdevelopment, being informed by the particular challenges and predicaments that face the African continent. African feminism has been able to bring the key role of gender in African underdevelopment to many international arenas. Gender discourses in international development have only become acceptable as a result of years of painstaking research and activism, challenging male bias in development. Feminist thinkers from Africa have played key roles in the international networks that have driven this change. Notable among these are the South-south network Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), and the continental Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD), both established in the early 1980s. Despite the failure of many institutions to implement policy commitments to gender equality, the fact is that feminists have succeeded in shifting the discourse in important ways. However, many African governments sign up to international instruments on women's rights and put national gender policies that pledge commitment to gender equality in place, but then do very little when it comes to concrete operationalisation and commitment of resources (Kwesiga, 2004; Ahikire, 2007). I see this discursive shift as a major success of the feminist movement in Africa, as well as the success of African feminists in international arenas. We have pushed demands for gender equality into development discourse and earned this legitimacy. Amina Mama alerts us to the fact that the world of development is a complex one, in which gains and setbacks are the product of complex negotiations within and across the hierarchies of power that constitute and drive the development industry (2005: 97). Even so-called 'lip service' is suggestive of a change in the ethos that we may build on, by fostering greater and more substantive feminist engagement in the years ahead.

The political sphere is another arena in which feminist gains can be counted. We can now say without any doubt that African women constitute a political constituency, within which women's collective interests can potentially be articulated. Although the situation varies widely in the different countries, there is a sense in which women's inclusion into political institutions has expanded the discourse on political participation and the understanding of democracy in Africa. Women have become very much more visible in African politics, where they have set new global precedents in terms of their numbers and—perhaps more arguably—in terms of their impact on public policy agendas. Globally, four out of the first ten countries with the highest numbers of women in national legislatures are African countries, with Rwanda topping the list with 63.8 per cent.[2] In several countries—South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia and Burundi among them—women win over 30 per cent of parliamentary seats (Tripp et al., 2009).[3] In a few cases, women have been able to push their way into difficult post-conflict reconstruction processes to articulate demands for inclusion in the processes of re-writing constitutions and reconstituting the political order (Tripp et al., 2009). For example in Uganda, the logic of gender balance has been institutionalised even where there is no legal requirement to do so. To be sure, there are many instances where the concerns for gender balance are cosmetic or even tabled derisively or as something of a joke. It is also true that where political institutions are undemocratic and/or dysfunctional, inclusion of women does not mean much. Yet the impact of the continued presence and relevance of gender in public discourse cannot be underestimated. Women have succeeded in establishing a norm of inclusion in politics, whatever the limits of that inclusion might be.

The process of legitimation has been achieved through increasingly effective mobilisation over many years. Women across the continent have created numerous platforms – Networks, Forums, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) – through which women's collective interests are voiced. The visibility of gender in the development arena in fields such as education, agriculture and health can, to an extent, be attributed to the ability of women to organise their numbers to highlight their issues and advocate for them.

This steady encroachment can be understood as a quiet revolution in the African social fabric, the result of feminist inroads into public discourse.

We see more and more society-wide engagement with feminism albeit with different levels of success. It is very clear that the feminist practice and discourse has been imbued into the societal discursive processes. In general, more and more people in rural and urban Africa have been exposed to basic concepts of gender and the language of women's rights, gender balance and the girl-child is part and parcel of the local discourse. There is more talk and more contestation around gender identity, in urban and rural areas alike, to the point that we are now compelled to deal with the question of masculinities in crisis, as men wrestle with new realities where femininity is no longer synonymous with dependency and subordination (Meer, 2011).

Hence, it is not business as usual. The multiplicity of women's daily struggles and organisational spaces at local, national and international levels has, in a way, pushed the social boundaries. Without doubt, these struggles have been imbued within what Mkandawire (2005) refers to as the pan-African concept. The moral panic as demonstrated by worries about the family and about women who allegedly want to rule their husbands testifies to this social milieu. But even in this case where gender equality is ridiculed or seen as a threat to society (especially to the institution of the family); it remains a fact that there is great potential in the increased visibility of the gender question. In my view the panic over masculinity has a direct linkage to the ways in which African feminism has destabilised hegemonic discourses. The visibility of gender equality as a public issue has had the effect of placing patriarchal norms and values under relative stress. Relative stress, in a sense that the patriarchal order is compelled to move from the realm of "orthodoxy" to that of "heterodoxy" (Agarwal 1997), as larger numbers of people are likely to encounter the question of gender equality, even in remote/marginalised contexts far from centres of power and politics. Even when there is resistance, conservative reaction or even violent backlash, it still means that women have succeeded in making their issues part and parcel of public debate: they can no longer be dismissed or relegated to the privacy of the home. Indeed, resistance means that society is being forced to engage and in this way, moments for greater transformation could as well be nurtured.

The pitfalls

This reflection raises a critical paradox. And this is around the relative permeation of African feminism into the development arena. The alarm bells

have started ringing loudly, to the effect that this permeation has at the same time generated increased developmentalism and reductionism. In other words, feminism, as a struggle for transformation of gender relations, is increasingly being conscripted into, perhaps even engulfed by, the increasingly neo-liberal development industry, with disturbing consequences. African feminism may be threatened by its own success. Having struggled to get in as a way to intervene more effectively, many feminists now find their politics compromised by the fact that they now dance within the belly of the proverbial beast.

In order to be effective in the global development arena, great effort was put into making feminist change agendas intelligible to bureaucrats and development actors. Re-naming feminist agendas for ending the oppression of women in the more inclusionary terms of "women in development" or "gender equality" has not been without its consequences.

First, let us take the example of gender training. From the 1990s onwards gender training held a promise for actualising the feminist dream of spreading the tentacles of gender development practice into state bureaucracies, development organisations, higher education and other spaces. African feminists both on the African continent and in the diaspora had a big impact on the popularity and legitimacy of gender training not only due to the level of need but also on the basis that African feminism articulated gender relations in a manner that took on the issues of intersectionality at the very material level. And without a doubt, the institutionalisation of gender training in the 1980s and 1990s was an achievement in that it offered a strategy enabling feminist engagement with male-dominated development paradigms. Over time however, gender training quickly became one of the major vehicles for a broader process of de-politicisation, thereby undermining the feminist critical edge (Meer 2011, Mukhophadhyay and Wong, 2007).

This contradictory success of is what I have termed the inherent vulnerability of feminist engagement in Africa, vulnerability that is paradoxically structured within the inroads that African feminism has been able to make in the development discourse (Ahikire, 2008). In this whole trajectory, vulnerability of the feminist engagement is partly embedded within the operationalisation of the Gender and Development (GAD) perspective. The concept of gender evolved within a context of robust feminist debate and promised to provide more impetus to the radical, liberal and Marxist feminist insights, especially within the articulation of socialist feminism. This strength is drawn from

the critical engagement with gender relations as context-specific social and political power relations and extends to addressing complexities in the bid to transform those relations. Given the importance of the development industry in the South generally and to Africa in particular, GAD as an approach quickly gained popularity, understood as holding the potential for translating feminist ideas into concrete practices that would change the lived reality of women. For example, widespread poverty, deprivation, war, displacement, and global marginalisation all make Africa a continent struggling with the problem of development, so to say. GAD, in this sense, offered a handle for feminism, African feminism in particular, to simultaneously speak to the problems of development as well as to its gendered nature.

However, the need to translate this handle on development into actions that make a difference in women's lives took a new turn as African feminists made pragmatic efforts to make their goals and the concepts accessible to development agencies. Consequently, the gender and development discourse has been viciously watered down. GAD has progressively assumed a life of its own, and ultimately become emptied of its basic feminist imperatives. In what seems to be a redirection to more pressing issues of material deprivation, GAD then evolved as a realm of 'problems', largely constructed as a field with no competing discourses, and largely predicated on rhetoric and instrumentalism. The popularity of instrumentalism meant that policy-makers and donors would be easily on board (Win, 2007). Policy-makers were quick to grab the fact that, for example, including women is good for development. The World Bank was also quick to declare that, unless women are considered, full development would remain a futile exercise (World Bank 1993), implying inclusion of women was necessary for efficiency, as opposed to a much more nuanced concern over social justice. This has meant that we are increasingly faced with the popularity of a watered-down concept of gender. The de-politicised application of the concept of gender has progressively made it possible for it to be used and/or abused comfortably, even in anti-feminist circles.

One clear development stemming from the post-Beijing inclination to reporting mechanisms and the whole emphasis on gender mainstreaming is the increased bureaucratisation and professionalisation of the gender equality crusade. I see this as a direct result of the truncated success of the GAD perspective. The Beijing process marked a new era, where feminists around the world were able to crystallise the demand on national governments to

be accountable to women. Gender mainstreaming then became a rallying point. In Africa feminists succeeded in popularising the notion of gender mainstreaming and the whole arena of demanding specific actions within government departments leading to the demand for certain skills. Quickly then the arena of gender knowledge and activism became overly professionalised.

Admittedly, there is a wealth of documentation as a result of this professionalisation. There is more information on the status of women and the gender terrain of different spheres than there ever was. However, this development has, in a sense, retarded the thinking around gender equality. There is a preoccupation with the technical assessment and efficient delivery of pre-defined outputs, referred to as "UN feminism", a posture far removed from the liberatory concerns of the international women's movement (Mama, 2004).

Specifically, gender mainstreaming has brought about a bureaucratic discourse in which development actors can hide without necessarily being accountable to women. In many of the cases gender mainstreaming has been translated to mean that gender is a 'cross-cutting' issue. What this has meant in reality is that gender remains at the rhetorical level, hanging on that one sentence usually appended onto policy statements (Kwesiga 2003). Gender budgeting, for example, would otherwise bring to the fore the whole philosophy of democratisation, redistribution and transformatory practice. Instead, it is treated in a technical, static manner, devoid of political engagement and, hence, with very limited outcomes.

On the ideological front there is increasing de-politicisation arising out of the false popularity of the term gender. As a result, what Tamale refers to as the "F-word" being increasingly demonised. It is not uncommon to encounter such statements as:

I am a gender expert but I am not a feminist

I am a gender activist but I do not like feminism
Feminism is a luxury for the west and not for African women

We need a gender consultant who is practical and not abstract (Ahikire 2007)

Hence, as several scholars have argued, the concept of gender has been taken on in a way that is emptied of its political impetus and is atheoretical—and therefore divorced from feminism. Accordingly:

> [w]e avoid the F-word: Feminism. However I personally steer clear of
> the term gender activist. This is because it lacks the political punch
> that is central to feminism. In the African context, the term gender
> activist has had the regrettable tendency to lead to apathetic reluctance,
> comfortable complacency, dangerous diplomacy and even impotence...
> we see gravitation towards 'inactive activists' (Tamale, 2006: 39).

The point here is not at all aimed at demeaning the current efforts across
the continent. The fact that the terrain of contesting patriarchal power is
overly complex has to be kept alive. Rather, this is a contribution to voices
articulating the urgent need to address the inherent vulnerabilities, particularly
in African feminism, that may end up negating the gains already registered
and blocking progress as well.

Clearly, the language employed in the contemporary period is highly
de-politicised (Ahikire, 2007, Tamale 2006, Meer 2011). This is the origin of
statements such as: "Gender does not mean women only"; "Gender means
both men and women"; "Empowering women does not mean excluding men,
men have to be brought on board". This also speaks to the origins of the
phenomena of male champions and men's organisations for gender equality
(Meer 2011). Whereas such phrases look innocent and inclusive at face value,
they do threaten to empty feminism of its transformatory imperatives. Pereira
alerts us to the fact that such appropriation and dilution of feminist-inspired
terms goes beyond "benign changes in meaning to involve differences in
intent and political interests" (Pereira 2008: 49). There is an urgent need for
feminism in Africa) to re-invent its impetus. Gender, empowerment, gender
mainstreaming, are some of the terms in dire need of liberation, as they
have now been reduced to a mere game of numbers (Isis-WICCE, 2013). The
vagueness in the naming largely animates minimalist agendas.

And so, is it possible to make a connection between the dominance of
minimalist gender agendas and rising conservatism? Why, for example, is
there a marked upsurge of efforts to create alternative routes within state
structures to re-legalise discrimination against African women, which is
otherwise outlawed by international instruments and national constitutions?
There is an increase in social conservatism and extreme fundamentalisms,
especially those arising out of religious machinations but specifically seeking
state legitimation, which I see as a reversal in feminist gains over time. We see
this reversal, for example, through retrogressive legislative processes—debates

and actual pieces of legislation. I use three cases, from Namibia, Kenya and Uganda, to explicate this concern.

The Debate on Wife-Swapping in Namibia

Wife-swapping among Namibia's nomadic tribes has been practiced for generations, but a legislator's call to enshrine it in the law has stirred debate about women's rights and tradition in modern society.

The practice is more of a gentleman's agreement where friends can have sex with each other's wives with no strings attached...

The wives have little say in the matter, according to those who denounce the custom as both abusive and risky in a country with one of the world's highest HIV rates...

"It is a culture that gives us unity and friendship", said Kazeongere Tjeundo, a law-maker and deputy president of the opposition Democratic Turnhalle Alliance of Namibia...

Tjeundo said he plans to propose a wife-swapping law, following a November legislative poll when he is tipped for re-election.

Known as "*okujepisa okazendu*"- which loosely means "offering a wife to a guest... (Shinovene Immanuel, 2014).

Kenya Passes Bill Allowing Polygamy

Polygamy is common among traditional communities in Kenya, as well as among the country's Muslim community.

Kenya's parliament has passed a bill allowing men to marry as many women as they want, prompting furious female MPs to storm out...

The proposed bill had initially given a wife the right to veto the husband's choice, but male members of parliament overcame party divisions to push through a text that dropped this clause.

"When you marry an African women, she must know that the second

one is on the way, and a third wife...this is Africa" MP Junet Mohammed told the house...

Female MPs stormed out of the late night session in fury after a heated debate. "We know that men are afraid of women's tongues more than anything else" female legislator Soipan Tuya told fellow MPs... (*The Guardian* Friday March 21 2014).

Miniskirts in Uganda
President Yoweri Museveni has signed a law, which criminalises indecency and Promotion of Pornography.

Henceforth, women have been forbidden from wearing clothes like miniskirts and cleavage-revealing blouses ("tops") that supposedly excite sexual cravings in public...

Asked to draw precise indecency lines, the minister (Ethics and Integrity, Fr. Simon Lokodo) said: "If you are dressed in something that irritates the mind and excites other people especially of the opposite sex, you are dressed in wrong attire and please hurry up and change" (*The New Vision* Newspaper, February 28, 2014).

Needless to say, women's movements in Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, to mention but a few, have mobilised against the various bills attacking their rights and bodily integrity. But the larger picture is one in which while feminists wrestle with the challenges of de-politicisation, a climate of misogynist reaction has formed, justifying itself by defining "African culture" according to the interests articulated by influential but sadly conservative men.

African feminism faces the challenge of rising above reversals of this kind. The context I have outlined highlights several imperatives. We need to re-politicise our concepts, and clarify the difference between liberal and neoliberal appropriations, on the one hand, and male backlash, on the other. To do this we will also need to utilise regional and pan-African spaces and policy instruments to respond to the more deadly manifestations of anti-feminism. The likely spaces may include specific regional blocs such as the East African Community (EAC), Southern African Development Community

(SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), possibly the Arab Maghreb Union and the pan-African AU.

Many additional and emerging questions beyond the scope of this article require in-depth analysis and engagement. There are a host of questions about the global context in which such extreme divergences arise and take root in some of the world's most marginalised nations. What is it about the current conjuncture that generates such tensions? Why is the backlash around culture and sexuality gaining currency at this particular time? What is the extent and nature of foreign involvement with regard to feminist movements as compared to conservative organisations, notably Christian and Muslim networks and other ostensibly philanthropic associations with ideological agendas?

Women across the continent are resisting these various incursions into their lives in overt and covert ways, thus advancing more radical feminist thinking than that which has manifested in the political and intellectual malestreams of the continent. Africa's feminist thinkers are once again compelled to document, demystify and subvert these conservative and reactionary forces with a view to holding the line and pursuing the radical and visionary edges of Africa's more liberatory politics.

By way of conclusion

African feminism seems to have made a breakthrough in terms of political and social legitimation. Yet we risk falling into still another dilemma, where the dynamic of legitimation has at the same time bred watered-down versions of feminist practice and, in a way, undermined the capacity to address the re-legitimation of crude anti-feminist conservatism. There is need to re-claim language, for instance, to reverse the tendency of reducing key political concepts into buzzwords. This will require a conscious effort to re-popularise the use of the concepts of power and gender relations. Terms such as "engendering", "gender mainstreaming", "empowerment", "gender-sensitive" all have to be re-problematised, and their use analysed and contextualised. There could well be costs involved in this re-birth. The costs could be in terms of temporary loss of and/or decrease in donor funding as well as the risk of losing support of mainstream policy-makers and -shakers. But this is a cost that African feminists must be ready to bear. African Feminism as an ideological force must of necessity be repositioned effectively to deploy the

African Feminist Forum Charter of feminist principles in such a way that we - as African feminists who define ourselves and our movements on our own terms - are firmly in control of the naming and legitimation process.

Endnotes

1. Preamble to the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists http/www.africanfeministforum.com/the charter –of-feminist-principles-for-African-feminists/

2. Inter-Parliamentary Union. No date. Women in National Parliaments, http://www.ipu.org/womn-e/classif.htm

3. This representation may not directly translate into gender-sensitive policies and legislation, as many feminists have observed (Tamale, 1999, Goetz, 2002). Countries vary in terms of the route to this representation and the impact thereof. However the legitimate presence in these spaces is no mean achievement. It represents the enormous efforts and potential for extending boundaries of the norm.

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