

The Dynamics of Birthing a Continental Feminist Movement: From Zanzibar to Accra

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Abstract

This feature article offers personal, candid reflections on African feminisms, movement-building and the bumpy journey towards crafting the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Women. I recount the story of creating an African-initiated, decolonial collective feminist space from the perspective of one in the “eye” of the storm. I analyse how, together with colleagues, we navigated the whirlwind of events that led to the first African Feminist Forum in Accra, Ghana in 2006 and the adoption of the Feminist Charter. I also reflect on some lessons learnt from this collective experience for future movement-building and feminist mobilisations.

Keywords: feminist organising, solidarity, feminist accountability, resources and power

The Context

It is common to come across comments such as, “There is no women’s movement in Africa.” This statement is entirely false. A movement is a group of people, organisations, or networks working together towards shared goals and agendas. Defining a women’s movement in Africa is challenging, but not impossible. African women have contributed immensely to the development of the continent in all spheres. They have achieved this through a variety of structures, including informal and formal organisations, coalitions, alumni associations, trade unions, faith-based networks, professional bodies and diverse civil society institutions operating at local, national and regional levels. With activities ranging from income generation and co-operative formation to

advocacy, research and awareness raising, they have advanced movements for social justice, equality and women's empowerment.

We cannot speak of one African women's movement because within this overarching collectivity lies multiple movements focused on justice for women and various gender issues. These include human rights, peace and security, governance and political participation, disability rights, knowledge creation, environmental justice, economic autonomy, sexual and reproductive rights, land rights, LGBTQ+ rights, worker's rights and the creative arts. For purposes of clarity, I will stick to the term "women's movement" in this article.

The roots of the contemporary African women's movement can be traced to anti-colonial and nationalist struggles (Tripp and Olajumoke 2024; Sedzro 2023). Like their male counterparts, African women played an integral role in resistance to colonial power and actively participated in liberation movements. However, these struggles brought an awareness that women's issues were not considered a priority, despite a commitment to defeating a common adversary. Women started to organise in trade unions, women's wings of political parties and as part of civil society organisations to ensure that their voices were heard and concerns addressed (Adeleye-Fayemi 2004). As African states started to bear the brunt of failed economic policies and the attendant economic and political instabilities, the struggles of African women intensified, particularly regarding socio-cultural, economic and political rights, as well as peace and security. In the 1980s and 1990s when many African states were plunged into crisis, African women initiated peacebuilding movements, fueled by a desperate need to break the cycle of violence and devastation in their communities.

Beyond the continent, the United Nations (UN) Women's Conferences, which spanned from Mexico in 1975 to Beijing in 1995, provided a crucial platform for African women to mobilise at local, national and regional levels as governmental and non-governmental delegates, and to place their priorities on the global agenda. The contributions of African women in these spaces were always influenced by their lived realities in their communities. To leverage effectively opportunities created by UN Women's Conferences, such as the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985, African women increasingly established more formal organisations. By the 1995 Beijing

Conference on Women, the African women's movement had expanded significantly. This was evident at the November 1994 preparatory conference in Dakar, which saw an unprecedented participation of over 5,000 representatives from African women's organisations, leading to a highly visible and very active presence in Beijing.

In the pre- and post-Beijing years, we have seen strong women's organisations and networks at the forefront of shaping gender justice agendas, which have served as training grounds for many of the continent's inspiring women leaders today. Regional organisations and networks – such as the African Women's Communication and Development Network (FEMNET), Pan African Women's Liberation Organisation (PAWLO), Abantu for Development, Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), Femme Africa Solidarité (FAS), Women in Law and Development, Africa (WiLDAF), Network of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, the Association for African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD) and the Association of Professional and Business Women (APBW) – worked consistently to amplify the voice of women's movements at continental and international levels. We also had strong faith-based women's networks in the movement at national and regional levels, such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Circle of Concerned African Feminist Theologians (CCAFT) and the Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). Professional women's networks included Soroptimists, Rotary, Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and various media women's associations.

The African women's movement is therefore quite diverse, often characterised by sharp internal contestations. These divisions reflect the continent's complexities – including ethnicity, language, ideology, colonial legacies, race, age, marital status, class, disability, religion, sexual orientation and geo-political and geographical differences. Given the immense size of the African continent and the deep complexities of regional issues, analysing the African women's movement is challenging. Even though we might assume that common interests and agendas could span these major divides and produce a unified platform, building any movement remains a work in progress.

I served as Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), an African women's international development organisation, from 1991-2001. AMwA

was established in March 1985 by a group of African women living in London. They had diverse backgrounds and identities as professionals, students, refugees, asylum seekers and dual citizens. Their objective was to create a safe space for African women from the continent for mutual support and solidarity. They also sought to retain their links with their original political and social movements.¹ Early members of AMwA included the late Wanjiru Kihoro (Kenya), Jerusha Castley Arothe-Vaughan (Kenya), the late Lauretta Ngcobo (South Africa), the late Annie Mubanga (Zambia), Charmaine Pereira (Nigeria), January Nozipho-Bardill (South Africa), Brenda Malalaika (Zimbabwe), Mabel Ikpo (Zimbabwe) and Amina Mama (Nigeria). Other African women living in London who joined in later years include Iheoma Obibi (Nigeria), Pamela Chikoti (Malawi), Gloria Ogunbadejo (Nigeria), Sarah Mukasa (Uganda), Jeannette Eno (Sierra Leone), Mukami Mccrum (Kenya), Nana Ama Amamoo (Ghana), Ndey Jobarteh (Gambia) and Nana Faye (Gambia). Most of us at AMwA were young women under 35 when we were preparing for the 1993 Vienna Human Rights conference and the 1995 Beijing conference. Concerned about the future of the women's movement on the continent – specifically our struggles for peace, democracy, political participation and economic empowerment – we knew we needed a say, which required intentional preparation.

In June 1994, I attended the Center for Women's Global Leadership Training Retreat at Rutgers University, convened by Charlotte Bunch. During the retreat, the late Stella Mukasa, one of the African participants, turned to me and said, "Bisi, can't we do this for our continent?" That simple question opened my eyes and led me to start the African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) in 1996. The AWLI rapidly became the flagship programme of AMwA and to-date has provided Pan-African training, networking and an information forum for young African women aged 25-40.²

When AMwA was establishing the AWLI, we aimed to develop a cadre of African women grounded in feminist theory and practice, gender analysis and strong leadership capacities. We anticipated that this process would cultivate the next generation of African women leaders, directly or indirectly, and we were right. To date, the AWLI has produced over 10,000 women leaders across Africa, many of whom now hold key decision-making positions within and outside the continent. AWLI alumni have become members of parliament,

ministers, senior government advisers, heads of regional and international agencies and founders of women's rights and feminist organisations. One of the AWLI alumni, Dr. Isatou Touray, served as Vice-President of The Gambia from 2019 to 2022. The AWLI has been one of the most successful feminist movement-building initiatives on the continent. Around 2003, AMwA relocated its operations from London to Kampala and continues to run the AWLI from different locations on the continent.

Over the years, my interactions with key figures in the African women's movement, both on the continent and in the Diaspora, as well as findings from the AWLI, have revealed specific, multi-layered tensions and fault lines common to movement-building. Of these, I address four primary challenges.

One of the contentious issues was what I refer to as the "politics of naming." Despite the dedication and hard work of many women's rights activists in the movement, they were reluctant to identify as feminists. This reluctance was due to a range of reasons, key among them the belief that feminism carried too much imperial and colonial baggage, and that we should not be seen as investing in belief systems that undermine our African heritage and identity.³ This was not a simple divide; it had implications for what were considered core feminist values and principles, such as bodily integrity, sexual autonomy and choice (Tamale 2024, 3). While there were issues around which it was easy to build consensus – typically liberal feminist agendas such as non-discriminatory legislation, peace-building, education and political participation of women – bridging divides over abortion and LGBTQ+ rights proved difficult within women's movements. Feminists made it clear that a movement cannot exist while explicitly withdrawing solidarity from others. Many women's rights activists preferred to use the term "gender activist" rather than admit to being feminists. It was quite common to hear, "I am a feminist but..." Those of us who were unapologetically feminist interpreted this to mean, "I am a feminist, but I do not believe in abortion, LGBTQI+ rights, or full gender equality." This remains a key issue for feminist movements today.

A second problematic area for the African women's movement was the inter-generational challenge. It was an "us versus them" dynamic that, sadly, continues to haunt our movements. Older activists feel undermined and disrespected while younger activists resist the real or imagined silencing of their

voices. In creating and running the AWLI, I was mindful of this and ensured that we encouraged healthy and mutually respectful engagements across generations. Older African women served as faculty members for the AWLI, allowing us to learn from one another.⁴ While it is often assumed that older feminists are more conservative and younger feminists more radical, the reality is far more complex.

Third, sustaining women's organisations and networks posed a significant challenge. Because the survival of most women's movements depended on external donor funding, they were effective at delivering time-bound projects but hindered in their long-term growth and evolution.

The fourth challenge I observed was the lack of space for African women and their movements to converge on their own terms to address these tensions. African women faithfully attended the UN/Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) regional meetings. These inter-ministerial sessions were primarily charged with reviewing progress on gender equality commitments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action. As many women's organisations attended outside official delegations, they had minimal input into the deliberations. Most of their activities took place in the NGO parallel sessions, with little filtering into official positions. We also regularly attended the annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings in New York, where the meeting dynamics were similar. Furthermore, a number of us in the movement were members of the Association for Women's Rights and Development (AWID) and frequently attended the triennial AWID Forums held in various parts of the world. While working with global feminists is always insightful, it did not provide an autonomous space for African feminists to reflect and strategise. This lack of autonomy led to the creation of a dedicated platform for African feminists.

The bumpy road to Zanzibar

In March 2001, I attended an AMwA training workshop in Kampala, Uganda on "Understanding the UN and Effective Participation in United Nations Conferences" – a preparatory meeting for the UN World Racism Conference which took place in Durban, South Africa that August. This event took place

just before I left AMwA to become the Executive Director of the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) in Accra.⁵

AWDF, the first Africa-wide grant-making foundation for women, was established by three African women in 2000: the late Joana Foster (Ghana), Hilda Tadria (Uganda) and Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi (Nigeria). It was created to provide African feminists and women's rights activists with access to flexible funding for community-driven initiatives. The politics of development philanthropy at the time meant that only larger, well-established organisations had access to funding, and even then, conditions often forced them to align with donor priorities rather than their own. AWDF emerged from the African women's movement, rooted in the concerns of African women and a belief that they have the expertise to drive change in their contexts. During my time with AMwA and the AWLI, it became apparent that lack of resources was a major hurdle for the alumni; many wanted to act on inspiration gained from the AWLI, but financial constraints hindered them. Several impactful initiatives emerged from AWLI alumni which are still in existence today. Examples include the Young Women's Leadership Institute, founded by Saida Alli (Kenya); the Women's Leadership Network, founded by Linga Mihowa (Malawi); The Ark Foundation, set up by Angela Dwamena-Aboagye (Ghana); and Project Alert, established by Josephine Effah (Nigeria). All these organisations became grantee partners of AWDF over the years.

At the Kampala meeting in March 2001, where I was invited as a resource person, I observed that African women's NGOs were constantly invited to the spaces created by others rather than creating their own. The participants agreed that African women needed their own standing conference to which they would invite others to participate and observe. I promised that AWDF, which was just launching, would look into this as a strategy to strengthen women's movements.

In 2002, a year after the Kampala commitment, I began discussions with colleagues on the AWDF board about a biennial standing conference for African women. At the time, AWDF's funding was not restricted to women's organisations doing "explicit" feminist work; we funded both feminists' and gender activists' initiatives. We understood that we were working with women in various contexts, and that personal politics might not always align with

organisational positions. We believed that the first step was to support the agency of African women in ways that respected their context. As an explicitly feminist funding organisation, this did not imply that we encouraged anti-feminist work.

Throughout this period, I was in discussions with my mentor, Tamika (pseudonym), about forming an African Feminist Congress. A brilliant scholar, Tamika is both a profound theorist and a spellbinding lecturer, but sadly, we disagreed over the Congress.

In October 2002, I was scheduled to attend that year's African Grant makers Affinity Group meeting in Chicago. From there I was to proceed to Guadalajara, Mexico for the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum. I had a conversation with Jean Kamau, a very good friend of mine from Kenya who was, like me, quite close to Tamika. Jean was also headed to the AWID Forum but planned to stop over in the US to support Tamika, who was dealing with personal problems. I immediately changed my plans to spend time with Tamika, as I believe personal support and solidarity are key feminist principles. Tamika picked us up from the airport on our arrival in the US. During the long drive to her place, she asked about the state of the women's movement on the continent, and I told her about the plans to convene a Feminist Congress. Tamika expressed her interest and commitment to the project, and we agreed to work together. However, I understood this to be an AWDF project, in which our role was to facilitate planning and coordination, while women in the feminist movement determined the scope and focus.

At the AWID Forum in Guadalajara, I shared the information with several African feminists I met there and promised to follow up on future plans. Approximately one month after I returned to Accra, I was shocked to receive an email from Tamika inviting nearly 30 women to a planning meeting for an African Feminist Congress in Zanzibar, scheduled for July 2003. The message failed to mention AWDF's role or our previous discussions. Confused, I called Jean Kamau – who was copied in the invitation – and asked whether she had seen it. I also asked her whether she thought it was the same meeting we discussed with Tamika. She confirmed it was and advised me to follow up with Tamika for clarification.

I wrote to Tamika, asking why her message departed from our earlier discussion. She responded that the idea of an African Feminist Congress did not belong to AWDF, that many others had considered it and that its origin did not matter. She also expressed concern that AWDF wanted to “institutionalise” the feminist congress and that would endanger the space. I was deeply concerned by her response. While the origin of the idea did not matter, that was not the main point; plans had been made and commitments given, yet here we were, going off on a different track. Ironically, despite my earlier clarification that AWDF would fund the Congress preparations to avoid external influence, she ignored this and approached a European donor for the planning meeting.

However, by the time I arrived in Zanzibar on a beautiful afternoon in July 2003, I had moved past everything that transpired. I was looking forward to a great week with wonderful sisters, with an open mind and heart. Apart from a brief essay I wrote after the event, entitled, “Who is an African Feminist?” (Adeleye-Fayemi 2013a) and a detailed background in my autobiography (Adeleye-Fayemi 2013b), I have never spoken at length about the infamous Zanzibar meeting of July 2003. What follows is an abridged version of the essay. I chose this version because I wrote it while the events were still fresh in my mind, when I could still recall every face and voice.

Who Is an African Feminist?

I am writing this on a plane. I am on my way back home to Accra from Zanzibar after the most disappointing meeting of my life. This is not merely one of the most disappointing meetings; it was the most disappointing meeting I have ever attended. And I should know; I have been to more meetings than I can bear to count. I am on my way home feeling empty, sick, devastated and worried about my physical and emotional health.

What was so special about the meeting? It was billed as “The first ever gathering of African feminists on the African continent” which, of course, was cause for celebration. It was meant to be a gathering of some of the best feminist thinkers, writers, practitioners, teachers and scholars Africa has produced. The billed “stars” were all “Sheroes” who have fought many battles, weathered many storms, walked on water, built castles with bare hands and bear the scars of decades of struggle. Together, these women would bring their wisdom, grace and intellect to bear on crafting a new

identity for African feminists; this, after all, has been their life's work. The meeting was therefore supposed to be a celebration of all they had worked so hard for. They had come together to plan an even bigger event to take place a year later, to institute a tradition of formal feminist organising on the African continent. So, what happened? The African feminists came alright. However, some of them left their souls at home. The gathering had been predicated on several critical assumptions such as:

- Every feminist in the room had “earned” the right to be there.
- They would bring their many lived experiences to bear on the process.
- There would be diverse views and opinions, but this is usually the basis for learning, clarifying and negotiation.
- There would be respect.
- The space would be safe.
- Should any conflicts arise, the necessary leadership would emerge, guided by wisdom, compassion and strength of character.
- The assumed feminist principles of solidarity, support and care would apply.

From the outset, it was clear that most of these assumptions were baseless. The meeting rapidly degenerated into a cesspit of conflict, intrigue, accusations, unfounded rumours and innuendo. Some of it was explicit, most of it implicit. The sisters began to feel unsafe with each other. They turned to familiar faces for reflection and comfort, the result of which were camps and factions, some real, some imagined. Those who didn't know whether “camps” existed or not, or couldn't decide which “camp” to join, soon had their minds made up for them. Arrogance, irresponsible behaviour, tantrums, reckless talk, posturing, sniping, bad body language, hair-splitting and sniggering; even in Diva Land where all this belonged, it was too much.

In fairness to the participants, the meeting went on. Even though the atmosphere was most unpleasant, the objective of planning an African Feminist Congress for 2004 was achieved. The sisters worked hard on plans, strategies and methodologies. There were indeed moments of fun, laughter and inspiration. Yet those were so few, and the tensions so many, that the fleeting moments of shared joy became mere interludes. Finally, they finished their work. They were in the process of pulling things together to evaluate the week's work.

One of the sisters, the convener, asked for permission to speak. She had been silent for two and a half days of the meeting, and no one knew why, though many reasons had been filtered through the corridors, coffee breaks and camps. She proceeded to speak for 30 minutes, and when she finished, the hard work that had gone into the planning and execution of such a difficult gathering all went up in smoke.

Some of these women had forgotten very important things. What makes an African feminist is not how many African countries you have visited or how many despotic governments you have fought to a standstill. It is how much you care for the people, land and souls of this continent in all its diversity and contradictions. What defines an African feminist is not the papers she has written, the books she has read, the patriarchy she has challenged, or the frequency with which she uses the word “feminist”. Rather, it is the depth of her love and respect for women, her treatment of other women and her unwavering dedication to the empowerment of others. The fact that all these Sheroes were African feminists who had fought patriarchy all their lives was not enough to save this gathering. There was not enough respect, humility, trust and love – qualities that no amount of polish or sophistication can replace. Scratch the surface, and even the most refined character is revealed to be as common as brass.

After the dust had settled from the conflict, some women of integrity tried to reunite the group and find a resolution. The most shocking aspect of this gathering was that some attendees refused even to listen. The meeting could hardly be called a conciliation session, because there was no acknowledgement of damage done to persons and reputations. Some participants publicly stated their desire to leave, while others pleaded for time to reflect and for discussions to continue online. No one knew whether the project that brought them together would survive. The next morning, all the weary Sheroes left, talking and giggling nervously on the bus. At the airport, the owner of a modest duty-free shop did brisk business as the sisters hurriedly shopped for people they had forgotten to remember during their week in Diva Land.

Let me reorient myself in the story. One of the older, wiser Sheroes spoke to me at the airports in Zanzibar and Nairobi. She told me that what was happening was all about feminist politics and needed a political response. “Sure,” I said, “that is why I do not want anything to do with it anymore.” “No,” she said, telling me that I need to “rise above it all.” I reminded her of how many times she had asked me to “rise

above something,” particularly in relation to this near-doomed project. I can no longer continue to rise; I am no angel and I have no wings to fly with.

We all have a certain capacity to manage pain and trauma, and perhaps I have reached my limit. A part of me wants to stay and fight for what I believe in. I have worked too hard for too long to concede ground to a group of self-absorbed divas who will shape the theory and practice of feminism in Africa for the next generation. I do not have the strength to continue this battle right now. However, if most women in the group see the need to establish a code of conduct, I might reconsider.

In November 2002, before my trip to Zanzibar, I attended a meeting of the Women and Peace Network in Dakar, Senegal. This gathering brought together community-based activists, scholars, politicians, gender advocates and a handful of feminists, mostly from West Africa. They were all from countries that had experienced violent conflict. I spent three days with these sisters and left feeling empowered, refreshed and at peace. These were not high-profile feminists with international acclaim. Most had never written a book or published an article, nor would their introductions widen your eyes in awe. Yet, they are Sheroes nonetheless. They have stared death in the face and have suffered or witnessed unspeakable atrocities. Though they bear physical and emotional scars, they laughed, sang and hugged. They navigated their disagreements through honest listening and mutual understanding, ultimately finding acceptance and creating a safe space. Deeply connected, they share a profound love for Africa and African women. To me, those are African feminists too, regardless of whether they understand the politics and power of naming. Yet the definition of African feminism we formulated in Zanzibar excludes most of them. Thinking back, who were we to determine who was an African feminist? Did we earn that right?

We cannot claim to be African feminists if we cannot keep faith and protect our spaces. In Zanzibar, an African feminist space was created but subsequently misused by African feminists themselves to denigrate, vilify, humiliate and disempower others. Since none of us have wings to fly, we rely on our souls to envision a better future and lift ourselves to higher ground. That is when we fly. If, through our arrogance and selfishness, we lose our souls, we will come crashing down alongside our hopes and dreams – and those of future generations. Now that we have crash landed, only time will tell if we will ever fly again. I truly hope so.

Until then, I am going home to mend my broken heart. There were some Sherones who did take their hearts to Zanzibar: the ones with love in their hearts and life in their eyes. They are the ones I laughed with, felt safe with, cried with and share this story with. You will always be my special Sherones, and perhaps we will indeed learn how to fly again.

The “Zanzibar Survivors”

When I wrote this 23 years ago, I was in pain, confused and sad. I need to stress that this is merely my own account and interpretation of events. I do not present it as the definitive truth of what happened in Zanzibar. With over 30 participants in attendance, a single objective truth is impossible; instead, there are many possible perspectives.

The saga described above reveals the shock, betrayal and sadness that engulfed the meeting room and other spaces in Zanzibar. It vividly demonstrates how easily feminist principles can collapse under the weight of ego and power struggles, and how movements can reproduce the very hierarchies they oppose. This dynamic reminds me of Jo Freeman’s classic 1970 essay, which warns women’s movements about the limitations of “leaderless” groups and how a lack of structure undermines their very foundation (Freeman 1970). Zanzibar was a clear example of how unacknowledged power dynamics, unfettered hierarchies and ego-driven disputes can sabotage movement-building and transformative visions. It further highlights the validity of Steven Wineman’s “power under” concept, which argues that the legacy of unresolved personal trauma may lead to “powerless rage,” unleashing destructive cycles of sabotage and subversion (Wineman 2003; Batliwala 2010). Perhaps at the start of the exercise, it would have been beneficial to engage in deep self-reflection, and to reorganise ourselves in more formal structures that transcend the implicit values of our existing relationships. It was a painful but valuable lesson that served us well going forward.

The Zanzibar meeting fell apart for several reasons, and while the origins of the project were a factor, they played a minor role. The most serious tensions arose from ideological debates, specifically the question, “*Who is an African?*” which was triggered by the presence of White Southern African

women. Participants also debated at length about who was welcome to attend, specifically whether men should be allowed. The vast majority overwhelmingly said no. However, what upset some people was not the exclusion itself, but the condescending and vitriolic tone of the responses, particularly regarding the belief that attendance should be restricted to those who identified as feminists. A handful of people felt it should be open to anyone who wanted to attend, including those who identified as gender activists. These tensions should have been anticipated, since these issues were already causing fractures within the women's movement at the time. However, there was a distinct lack of empathetic leadership to guide the process. Some participants found it difficult to air their views without being challenged. Additionally, the lack of a designated facilitator caused the conversations to veer off track.

Going into the meeting, it had not occurred to me that we would need to debate who qualifies as an African, but when the discussion started, I recognised it as a political minefield. AMwA had faced this challenge in 1990 during a disagreement over the inclusion of Asian Africans. At the time, there had been an assumption that the organisation was strictly for Black African members. This situation sparked complex debates around race, identity and what belonging meant for White, Arab, Asian and multiracial Africans. It did not end well; it resulted in some members leaving the organisation. Thankfully, this all happened before my time. It had never occurred to me that men would be invited to attend. Sadly, a lack of listening, respect, humility and solidarity derailed our discussions.

For the next two years, those of us who had been friends before Zanzibar, or who connected at the meeting, continued to discuss the doomed project. We agreed that we would try again, though we had no idea when, and immediately started an email listserv to stay connected. In 2005, while preparing for the AWID Forum in Bangkok, we agreed to convene a meeting of the "Zanzibar Survivors." Those of us who fell into this group included Ayesha Imam (Nigeria/Senegal), Bene Madunagu (Nigeria), Sylvia Tamale (Uganda), Mary Rusimbi (Tanzania), Demere Kitunga (Tanzania), Sarah Mukasa (Uganda), Jessica Horn (Uganda), Muthoni Wanyeki (Kenya), Everjoice Win (Zimbabwe) and me. Hope Chigudu from Uganda, based in Zimbabwe, was supposed to attend the meeting in Zanzibar, but was unable to, so we included her in this new initiative. We all agreed that a lack of skilled

facilitation contributed to the outcome in Zanzibar, so we asked Hope to facilitate the Bangkok meeting.

We met late one afternoon after the AWID Forum in one of the meeting rooms at the host hotel. I had just completed my two-year term as AWID President (2003-2005) on a high note. I wanted to revisit the idea of creating an African feminist space because the reasons we needed one in the first place still existed – we were still gathering at the invitation of others. I originally wanted to bring the 2005 AWID Forum to Africa, but I held back to avoid any conflict of interest regarding my position as President. However, I discussed it with my successor, Geeta Misra from India, and she committed to having Africa considered for the next international forum, which led to South Africa hosting the AWID Forum in October 2008.

The “Zanzibar Survivors” meeting in Bangkok allowed us to evaluate the events in Zanzibar as objectively as possible. Determined to forge ahead, we used the gathering to draw up an action plan and officially rename the project the African Feminist Forum. We formed a Working Group comprising all the “Zanzibar Survivors.” We decided to discuss the action plan in January 2006 at the African Social Forum in Bamako, Mali, since some of us would be attending.

The Creation of the African Feminist Charter

As I was preparing for the Bamako meeting, I started to feel apprehensive. I had navigated this situation before. I had assumed everyone was committed to respect, accountability and transparency, and I was entirely blindsided. I knew that for this revamped project to succeed, we needed a different approach. I wanted to move forward, but to prevent a possible recurrence, I needed clear, collectively owned rules of engagement. I also felt it was important to articulate why we needed a dedicated space for African feminists and what that meant for us.

I reflected on the institutional issues involved, especially the wariness among some feminists regarding the institutionalisation of feminist agency. They fear that this could lead to a hijacking of voices and agendas, and the reproduction of unequal power relations, which can make feminist spaces

contentious. While I understand these concerns, I disagree that anchoring feminist work within an institutional setting is inherently negative. Movements usually begin with passion, volunteer energy and no hierarchies. As their work grows more complex – requiring coordination, fundraising, administration, programme development, documentation and governance – it becomes imperative to adopt more formal procedures (Freeman 1970). The primary leadership challenge is to ensure that the new phase of growth for the movement does not compromise our core values, vision, mission and passion. Reflecting on how I had to convince the AWDF board to approve the African feminist project to strengthen our work with partners, I could not help but feel a deep sense of sadness for the years that were lost. I proposed to the AFF Working Group that AWDF be allowed to host the AFF to ensure sustainability.

As the Bamako meeting drew closer, a plan crystalised in my mind. Every movement has contestations, and most of them never truly go away. We all went to Zanzibar knowing that these tensions existed, but we underestimated how much work needed to be done, and the sheer weight of negative emotions that some feminists carry. Ideological differences even within movements are nothing new and should not be conflated with mere personality clashes. However, our movements still struggle with power dynamics – namely “power-over” and “power-under” structures, rather than practising “power to” and “power-with” (Batiwala 2010). If we continue avoiding the real divides caused by control and hierarchy, we are making a critical mistake. I asked myself: what if we had a single statement that unified our efforts, a framework that captured our feminist politics and ideological clarity, while also weaving together our inspirations, aspirations, our commitment, shared values and mutual expectations ultimately creating a roadmap to inspire both ourselves and future generations of feminists?

At the Bamako meeting, I proposed that we consider adopting a Feminist Charter. I explained that this document would serve various purposes and, hopefully, protect us from the kind of implosion that occurred in Zanzibar. By January 2006, three years had gone by, but the emotional impact of Zanzibar still lingered for me. Yes, I had moved on and was willing to work with the other sisters to get the Feminist Forum going, but deep down, I was still afraid. Beyond the personal discomfort, I had to protect AWDF. It was one thing to have been caught up in a process that involved individuals with no

direct institutional affiliations. I did not want to make AWDF vulnerable if we took on the responsibility for guiding the process without safeguards in place. At Bamako, the AFF Working Group made three key decisions, beginning with an agreement that we needed a Feminist Charter. Some colleagues were unsure what the Charter would look like, so I offered to draft a concept and present it at the next Working Group meeting in Accra in April 2006. The second decision was that the AFF would be held biennially, with the AWDF hosting it for the first six years. Third, we scheduled the first AFF for November 2006 in Accra, Ghana.

During the 2000/2001 academic year, I served as the fourth Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Visitor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). As part of my obligations, in November 2000, I delivered the Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Lecture, “Creating and Sustaining Feminist Space in Africa: Local-Global Challenges in the 21st Century.”⁶ I drew upon insights from this lecture to write the first draft of the African Feminist Charter between January and April 2006.

Discussions with the AFF Working Group revealed that not only had many of us been traumatised by the events in Zanzibar, but almost all of us had endured toxic relationships within the feminist movement, particularly within our own organisations. Some of us younger feminists, in particular, had compelling accounts of our experiences with older feminists. We saw the Charter as an opportunity to explore the expectations of all those who identify as feminists, regardless of their location, affiliation, or identity. The key sections of the Charter were the Preamble (where we focused on the politics of feminist naming), Framing our understanding of Feminism, Our identity as African Feminists, Individual Ethics, Institutional Ethics and Feminist Leadership.

The AFF Working Group debated the draft at length at our April 2006 meeting and continued refining the document in the months leading up to the November AFF meeting. As an additional measure, when invitations were being sent out for the November 2006 AFF, we attached the draft Feminist Charter, asking participants to study it and commit to abiding by its provisions by signing an agreement. There was no room for sabotage, and all the participants signed the agreement. During the Forum, we facilitated discussions on the Charter, incorporating several valuable revisions before

finalising the document. Eventually, at the last plenary session, Jean Kamau from Kenya moved for the formal adoption of the African Feminist Charter. From then on, the Charter became a living document. As observed by Indian scholar-activist, Srilatha Batliwala: “[T]he Zanzibar experience led African feminist leaders to realise that... we need to create basic rules of engagement to govern how we treat each other and how to handle our own destructive tendencies. The African Feminist Charter, the first such code of conduct in the feminist world, was the powerful gift of the Zanzibar debacle” (2010, 20).

Healing our Wings and Lessons Learnt

The “Zanzibar Survivors” truly found their wings to fly again. I will forever value the connection, wisdom and peace I found while working with these wonderful women over the years. We did not always agree; we all shared the humility of knowing that none of us has all the answers. Since November 2006, the regional AFF has convened in Uganda, Senegal and Zimbabwe. In addition, National Feminist Forums have been organised across the continent, including in Ghana, Uganda, Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, Zimbabwe and Rwanda.⁷ At long last, what some of us had long fought for was happening: African women on the continent had the opportunity for a dedicated space where they could reflect, theorise and build collective agency.

Two key recommendations emerged from the adoption of the African Feminist Charter. First, the document needed dissemination and popularisation as a movement-building tool – an initiative taken up by all the national AFF chapters. Second, stakeholders across the feminist movement recognised the Charter’s value as an accountability framework. In 2008, the AWDF commissioned Hope Chigudu and Sarah Mukasa to adapt the Feminist Charter into a Feminist Organisational Development Handbook. The resulting document has since been used to advance individual and institutional feminist leadership across the continent.

At the 2016 AFF meeting in Harare, most of us on the original AFF Working Group rotated off, having served for eleven years. We handed the baton to a new cohort of feminists. In 2024, the AWDF initiated plans for a 2026 AFF to coincide with the 20th anniversary of both the AFF and the Feminist Charter. I sincerely thank Francoise Muduthe, CEO of the AWDF,

and her team for taking on this initiative and organising a reflection retreat for the original and current AFF Working Groups in Mauritius in August 2024.

The African Feminist Charter is a gift from the African feminist movement to the world. The document was created not to satisfy a funding requirement, nor simply to keep pace with global feminist movements. The Charter came out of our own experiences, pain, contradictions, compromises and commitment. We sought a permanent reminder of why we had come together, and a roadmap to sustain our movements. The Charter is also a declaration of freedom and a vital tool for decolonisation. Through this document, we not only affirmed our identity as African feminists, but also reclaimed the right to be African on our own terms, invested in the past, present and future of our communities. The document is a legacy to those who come after us, ensuring that it remains a testament to the fact that African feminists have always had their own voice.

One of the many lessons I have learnt is that movement building, as messy, nasty and intolerable as it can get, is a critical part of social transformation. Movements progress; they are never stagnant. Priorities change, leaders and thinkers rotate and knowledge is constantly created and evolves. What remains the same are our values, dedication to life-long learning, mutual respect and unconditional solidarity in the face of constant setbacks. For any social organisation, movement building is always a work in progress. Without movements built on individual and group efforts, our agendas for change often devolve into personal pet projects or short-term donor-driven initiatives. These rigid deliverable-focused projects are fundamentally different from sustainable efforts that seek lasting change.

However, I am fully aware that building a movement requires investments of emotional, intellectual and physical energy that can push people beyond their endurance. My position is that this is not an either-or scenario. We need committed, resilient leaders who can think clearly and make the necessary sacrifices, just as we need strong movements to unite disparate forces and drive cohesive change. As African feminists, our commitment to dismantling patriarchal power and oppression also requires the difficult work of introspection. We will make mistakes, offend others and experience hurt. Yet, we must also cultivate humility, practise forgiveness and nurture care for

ourselves and others. Thankfully, imperfect though it may be, the Feminist Charter serves as our compass. What carried us from Zanzibar to Accra with our wings healed is this: ultimately, African feminists declared in word, thought and deed, “*We are Feminists: No Ifs; No Buts; No Howevers.*”

Notes

1. For more information, see <https://akinamamawaafrika.org/>
2. To learn more about the AWLI, see <https://akinamamawaafrika.org/awli/>
3. The work of African feminist scholars and thinkers across generations has provided a range of perspectives in this regard. Examples are Amina Mama, Nawal el Saadawi, Philomena Chioma Steady, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Sylvia Tamale, Ifi Amadiume, Marie Angelique-Savane, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Patricia McFadden, Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayesha Imam. The need to push back on western feminist hegemony is what led to the establishment of the Association for African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD) in 1976.
4. Some of the older AWLI faculty members then included Patricia McFadden, Florence Butegwa, Jerusha Arothe-Vaughn, Gemma Mbaya, Ayesha Imam and Mukami McCrum. Other faculty members who were not “young” at the time were Sylvia Tamale, Sarah Mukasa, Kemi Williams, Iheoma Obibi, Everjioke Win, Stella Mukasa, Jeannete Eno, Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, Seble Dawit and Ruby Marks. This is not an exhaustive list.
5. See www.awdf.org
6. Adeleye-Fayemi, Bisi. 2000. “Creating and Sustaining Feminist Space in Africa: Local-Global Challenges in the 21st Century.” Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Lecture, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.
7. Others that are in the process of formation include Sierra Leone, Niger, Namibia, Botswana, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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