



**AFRICAN WOMEN'S
DEVELOPMENT FUND**

THE AFRICAN FEMINIST FORUM

“RECLAIMING OUR SPACES”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE
1ST AFRICAN FEMINIST FORUM

November 15th – 19th 2006,
La Palm Royal Beach Hotel Accra, Ghana

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AFRICAN FEMINIST FORUM
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INTRODUCTION

“This is not a forum for Feminists ‘if’, Feminists ‘but’, or Feminists ‘however’. This is a forum for FEMINISTS ‘full stop’.”- Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, opening ceremony of The African Feminist Forum, November 2006, Accra, Ghana.

The journey that led to the creation of the space in which African feminists can engage in the process of internal reflection, reconnection with one another and with the movement; a space free of the ‘ifs’, ‘ands’, ‘buts’ that have for so long fractured the agency of the women’s movement and diverted its energies, has been a long and sometimes arduous one. The creation of this space (the first ever of its kind in Africa) is in many ways, testament to how far the movement has come in Africa, but also a stark reminder of what it is up against. The statement made by the Executive Director and co-founder of the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF), Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi gave rise to the celebratory nature of the gathering. For here at last, was a space in which African women could celebrate their feminist identity without recourse to apology, qualification or compromise. At the same time, it highlighted the level of personal and collective commitment and courage required to propel the movement forward in the face of increasingly reactionary and hostile responses on several fronts to the issues that the movement in Africa is trying to address.



The African Feminist Forum (AFF), took place from 15th – 19th November 2006. The meeting brought together 120 participants from 16 African countries and the Diaspora working at different levels of feminist engagement and activism such as academia, NGOs (at international, regional, national and local levels), philanthropy, the Arts and media, and those working in the UN System. The conference made a significant contribution to the development of a feminist epistemology in Africa and created a solid foundation for building a feminist movement on the continent. The programme enabled deliberations that were inclusive of key feminist concerns on the continent. It sought to address feminist organising on 3 key levels:

- Key feminist concerns (from the personal to the political collective) – The development of an epistemological framework.
- Strategies for movement building and sustaining the feminist movement – including inter/cross generational linkages, coalition building and linkages with other social movements, resource mobilisation strategies, popularisation of feminism on the continent and resistance to backlash.
- Internal reflection on feminist organising on the continent – setting agreed standards for engagement and conduct as a feminist collective and as individuals within the movement in order to ensure alignment between theory and praxis.

SPECIFIC AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

THE KEY AIMS OF THIS CONFERENCE WERE:

- The creation of an autonomous space for African feminists through a biennial standing forum.
- Agreement on a Charter of Principles for feminist organising in Africa.
- A set of position papers on each of the thematic clusters that the AFF is organising around.
- Collation of a body of knowledge reflecting feminist agency that can be shared with feminists around the region including publications, articles, artistic expressions, films and so on.
- Ongoing engagement with other social movements and participation in the World Social Forum.

METHODOLOGY

The AFF program was organised along clusters which reflect the concerns and priorities of African feminists. Each cluster had two Coordinators. The Coordinators were responsible for identifying resource persons, background material and session design for their clusters. The clusters were as follows:

1. CRAFTING AN AFRICAN FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

- Writing and intellectual activism
- Identifying the specificities of African feminist thought (sources, tensions, strengths)
- Setting out the epistemic features of African feminist identity and intellectual construction
- Linking theory-making to feminist practice and transformation
- Understanding sisterhood and building solidarity
- Interrogating anti-feminist rhetoric and discourses of African authenticity in the Northern Academy

Coordinators:

Ayesha Imam and Sylvia Tamale

2. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS IN AFRICA;

- Re-visiting the discourse of women's reproductive rights and health in the African context
- Women's sexual rights and health
- Feminist responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- Interrogating the interface between state policies, notions of motherhood and health care for African women
- The impact of SAPS and Globalization on women's access to and use of health care on the continent
- The globalization of the pharmaceutical industry and threats to women's health

Coordinators:

Bene Madunagu, Jessica Horn and Sisonke Msimang

3. AFRICAN FEMINISM: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER; RESISTING FUNDAMENTALISMS

- Women in state politics (how do women negotiate space in the state)
- Becoming citizens: contesting rights and entitlements viz the African state
- Empowerment through state initiatives: assessing accountability by states for women's advancement
- The status of Gender Units/Women's Units and Gender Budgets
- Critically reviewing the notions and practices of 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender advocacy'
- Universalism and women's human rights
- Women's rights and the law (in the context of multiple legal codes, religions, customs, notions of ethnicity and nationality, and Constitutions)
- Experiences and rights of disabled/differently abled women
- Resisting fundamentalism (religious, customary and legal)
- Colonial laws and neo-colonial continuities: reform or transformation

Coordinators:

Codou Bop, Muthoni Wanyeki and Ayesha Imam

4. INTERSECTING-GENERATIONS:

- Identification and mentoring
- Nurturing the agendas and insights of young feminists
- Creating opportunities for emerging activists
- Crafting new and diverse 'feminist political cultures'
- How to support young African girls and women within a feminist politics

Coordinators:

Shamillah Wilson and Jessica Horn

5. FEMINIST CREATIVE EXPRESSION

- Documenting Feminist Herstories in Africa (beyond the post-colonial)
- Feminist film makers and writers (including issues of self-representation, audience and creative voice)
- The Arts in social change – developing critical consciousness
- Researching into and documenting women's achievements: a guide and model for young African women
- Creativity as feminist communication
- Writing as political expression and transformation

Coordinators:

Demere Kitunga & Bella Matambanadzo

6. AFRICAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS: ORGANIZATIONS, STRUCTURES AND CAPACITIES

- The current 'state' of African women's organizations and institutional capacity
- The relationship between women's organizations (as the bedrock of feminism) and the challenges of new feminist leadership
- Crafting and sustaining strong, autonomous women's organizations in a reactionary environment (how to build capacity for short and long term feminist activism)
- Resources and infrastructure for feminist activism (resource centers, websites and web-based information, etc)
- Making funding a feminist issue: dealing with the politics of donor funding (and politics) and the agenda of the African women's Movement

Coordinators:

Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi & Everjoice Win

7. CONFRONTING VIOLATION IN WOMEN'S LIVES:

- Militarism and militarized states : misogyny and the sexual violation of women and girls
- Strategies and successes in addressing gender based violence (public and private)
- Identifying our allies: building strategic alliances with men in the civil society
- Raising children differently: male socialization within a feminist culture
- Gender based and gender specific violence(practices which are the locus of female subordination and marginalization)
- Globalization and the new military order: implications for women's rights and security

Coordinators:

Bene Madunagu and Hope Chigudu

8. GLOBAL FEMINISM AND THE UN SYSTEM:

- Sub-regional feminisms and feminist collaborations (in particular North and sub-Saharan and across the language divides)
- Relationships between African feminisms and Diasporic feminisms (exiles, expatriates and refugees)
- Implications of a changing UN system for African women's activism and the Global Women's Movement
- Beijing + 10 and related current debates

Coordinators:

Mary Rusimbi and Sarah Mukasa

Conference tracks developed from these clusters each had specific questions focusing on analysis of the gains and challenges for feminist activism, the implications for movement building and praxis and on feminist organising for the future.

The conference in essence was carved out primarily as a site for reflection, reconnection and reenergising feminist activism and agency in Africa. As such, great care was taken to ensure

a programme that was inclusive, participatory, fun, challenging and rigorous. Thus in addition to content, particular attention was given to the deliberation methodologies that would be applied. The traditional plenary and workshop formats were used. Alongside these were incorporated other formats using role play in the form of talk shows, radio 'phone-in programmes', and debates. Each evening was devoted to the Arts with film screenings, poetry readings and drama. A fundraising African dance aerobics in which the conference delegates were sponsored to participate in the aerobics exercise class took place on the evening of 17th November.

Each of the participants was given a role and a set of responsibilities for the conference. Also, featuring as an integral part of the conference was the 'Well Being Centre' with clinics on self care, relaxation, health and well being for women. Conference participants could take time out of their busy schedules to attend to their own well being. Given the challenges generated from having to juggle multiple responsibilities, many women focus far too little attention on their own health, well being and needs, often ignoring them until the problems become acute. A critical feminist concern is the need for women to value themselves enough to create time to respond to their needs.

THE DELIBERATIONS

LOCATING OURSELVES

"I am a feminist by choice" Bene Madunagu

The opening session set the context for the deliberations over the course of the conference. Presentations highlighted the fact that becoming and being a feminist is a process of reflecting on, learning (and unlearning) values and how to bring them to life in our individual lives and our political and professional work in the interests of

all women. This implies seeing, understanding, defending and advancing all diversities amongst us as women—of class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation among others. Key to this process is the need to deconstruct the political-economic context which defines those values and shapes our notions of identity. We should mobilise and organise with a clear understanding of the contestation about our diversities from, in particular, cultural and religious perspectives. This does not come without challenges. The notion of African feminism itself brings us to the slippery slope in which the notions of culture and religion are negotiated and mediated often by agents other than ourselves. "Culture is a double edged sword" as Sylvia Tamale reminded the group.

Thus it is necessary to ensure that we speak from and act upon our cultural and religious perspectives in a manner that does not play into the old contestation about cultural/religious relativism and instead, contributes to universalism as we were reminded by Fatou Sow. This includes being prepared to engage with the issues that are difficult for us—the beginnings of African lesbian activism on the continent should be celebrated as well as engaged with to inform ourselves about the African feminist politics embodied in that activism.

CHARTING THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN AFRICA: TIMELINES 1945-2006

The purpose of charting the 'Herstory' of the movement was to assess the achievements as well as the current challenges in order to map appropriate strategies. In doing this exercise, we were reminded that we are part of a long history and tradition of feminist organizing on the continent. We have registered many successes, particularly at the normative level.

What is also evident is the many repetitions of failures that only documentation of our individual, institutional and movement building stories can help us resolve. It is clear that norms are not enough not just because of the complexity of implementing norms in practice but also because, in the absence of mobilization and organisation from the bottom-up, we've learnt that normative gains cannot be taken for granted. A powerful illustration of this was seen in the recent rape trial of Jacob Zuma, South Africa's former Deputy President during which there was minimal feminist support for the victim. We can no longer afford to have said, about any of us, as Prudence Madebele did, that: "The feminists were not there". It is therefore necessary to engage the question of mobilization and organization from the bottom-up, exploring, in particular, creativity; the fact that the visual is powerful in defining a new African feminist project in which our subjectivity is clear

It is also vital to foreground working from a solid knowledge base. Linking with African feminist scholars in a manner that informs our practice is central to moving forward. Whilst we recognise that much has been done, it is also true that it tends to be invisibilised, even to us, by the Eurocentric and patriarchal nature of the academy. Thus the need to reclaim the tools that African (and other) feminists have evolved to help us with work from a grounded, rigorous knowledge base is critical. We need to be clear about how the appropriation and lack of understanding about the potential of the gender mainstreaming tools crafted out of feminist agency, has led to their implementation in an ahistorical, non-political and non-threatening manner that denies women's human rights and the need for structural transformation. We must therefore inform ourselves about how to use these tools in ways that achieve the impact we want and consistently demand not just gender mainstreaming but women's empowerment as well.

THE STATE AND SOCIETY

The focus of this discussion was on the development of an understanding of the changed political-economic context within which we work—a context of neo-liberal globalization in which fundamentalisms fuel and are fuelled by ever-increasing militarization. The key points of emphasis for feminist activism were the need for clarity as to why and how fundamentalisms—economic, cultural and religious—are growing. In addition we need to understand how they impact on the range of African women's rights but particularly our reproductive and sexual rights, including our vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, and our capacity to address the violations we experience in armed conflicts (which, incidentally, are the logical outcome of fundamentalisms).

Equally important, was the need for clarity on how to recognize fundamentalist tendencies and trends in our daily lives. It is imperative to develop "early warning systems" regarding fundamentalisms as well as strategies to end impunity for abuse that emanates from these ideologies. Recognising that fundamentalists have clearly adopted "win hearts and minds" strategies, we need to counter, as Hope Chigudu suggested, the "weapons of mass destruction from the pulpit".

A number of suggestions were made in this regard, which fall, into two categories. The first is engaging with questions of cultural and religious interpretation and the other is engaging with the decision-making and power structures of cultural and religious institutions. It is noted that in so doing, it is necessary to map our possible allies. To this end, Ayesha Imam drew a distinction between conservatives on the one hand, as those who hold such values, but can with exposure to alternatives change their positions, and fundamentalists on the other. These she views as people who cannot be negotiated with as their views are firmly entrenched. Thus in the course of this work, it is necessary to include to the

greatest extent possible, the former in our own interests.

With regards to economic fundamentalism, we need to work on global governance beyond the United Nations to include the global financial architecture. Also highlighted was the need to work on the monetary and fiscal (tax) policies and practices at the national level, at which the financing, investment and trade commitments we are so opposed to are made.

Global and regional governance was repeatedly stressed. In particular, we need to (re) examine why we have engaged, how we have engaged, what gains we've made and what the challenges in achieving those gains have been. In addition working on the African Union and the UN remains important—dealing not only with the emerging gender mainstreaming architecture of both but more importantly, assessing how these institutions fit into the broader global governance framework.

At the national level, work on citizenship and equality rights remain important to enable African women's contributions to and enjoyment of the "democracies" we are constructing (or attempting to re-construct). We must continue to fight for African women's rights in the private sphere in this respect, but also ensure that our understanding of these rights informs our very notions of "democracy". Our articulation of the notion of democracy and how we conceive our states must be grounded in the idea of moving from purely representative democracies to more participatory ones. This implies moving our struggle for political participation beyond the usual debates about quantity and quality to debates on the governance structures we are participating in, and whether or not they facilitate active, participatory democracy.

HIV/AIDS was addressed as another critical area of engagement. In particular, it was asked why the HIV/AIDS and women's movements in Africa are still so far apart and how we need to bring

them together. In this process, our primary aim should be to keep at the forefront, the voices and solutions of the young African women who are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection, all African women living with HIV, and all African women caring for those living with AIDS.

MOVEMENT BUILDING

"Feminists are fine with the feminist struggle as long as there is no struggle" Marjorie Mbilinyi.

Explicit in this quotation is the idea of individual ethics as well as the courage and integrity to consistently try to manifest those ethics in our praxis. This track stressed the need to understand the ways in which our political-economic context(s) define our institutions, coalitions and movements. In short, we need to walk our talk through demonstrating accountability in our own lives as well as in the institutions, coalitions and movement we are building. It is also vital to bring an end to impunity for so-called African feminists who clearly transgress. Some ideas were put forward for ensuring this, including the development of a "peer review mechanism". We must also clearly define the African feminist project so that we can anticipate and be prepared for the struggles from which we are tempted to turn away—for instance, the real struggles over choice, the integrity of our bodies and sexual orientation on our continent.

Also critical to the efforts for movement building, is the need to develop African feminist transformational leadership, ensuring we engage with all power structures while retaining autonomous, critical spaces outside of those structures. Once again we were reminded to build on the knowledge our African feminist scholars have constructed and use the tools developed in a manner that advances women's empowerment.

A critical consideration in relation to movement building is the vexed question of mobilising financial resources. On this point, the need for

'thinking outside the box' was highlighted. This involves engaging with our traditional supporters but also working towards, the development of autonomous and sustainable avenues for resource mobilisation. Furthermore, Jessica Horn pointed out that we need to 'tell the story of transformation'. In other words we must think about how we define our impact and communicate that amongst ourselves as well as to those from whom we seek to raise financial resources.

FEMINIST FUTURES

"We must have the courage to dream and do differently" Shamillah Wilson

The final plenary brought together all the key points highlighted throughout the conference on building and sustaining the feminist movement for the future. The statement made by Shamillah Wilson reminded us of the need to embrace and work towards the fulfilment of a feminist vision that is truly emancipatory and challenges all forms of discrimination and exclusion. This requires the development of feminist leadership at all levels of organising, including governance together with integrity and honesty about how we deal with power. We need to institutionalise continuous internal reflection; to challenge our own fundamentalisms. 'The power of silence' that Pregaluxmi Govender talked about in which we commune with ourselves and one another through listening and hearing where 'the other is coming from' is vital for individual and collective growth, learning and unlearning and is a practice we must adopt.

In order to ensure a vibrant and meaningful future for the feminist movement on the continent, the need to reclaim feminist politics was highlighted again as was the need to strengthen the architecture of the feminist movement at all levels through education, popularisation – taking the feminist movement to the streets – as Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi noted. We were also

reminded that we need to revisit our reticence and reluctance to talk about power and money. For we cannot ensure a future for the movement if we do not take control of these forces and use them in ways that enable the kind of change we want to see, to happen. Feminists must become economically and financially literate, rather than passive observers.

EVALUATION FEEDBACK

The AFF has been evaluated as a major success and a much needed forum for engagement, re energising and reflection for African feminists. For a long time it was felt that as feminists on the continent, our organising was always mediated by other processes such as UN and AU meetings. This left little room for critical reflection and the creation of a feminist vision that was owned by African women. As such the meeting is seen to have 'raised the bar' for feminist discourse. A key success factor was the inclusion of young women as an integral part of all the deliberations. Effort was also made to include and to integrate diverse groups and interests such as sexual orientation, religion, class, race and so on. Participants report having left the conference feeling energised, challenged but with a clear sense of purpose and assessment of how to carry their work forward.

A key challenge was that of ensuring geographical and regional representation. Given the severe limitations on resources the proceedings were done in French and English. These are aspects that the working group of the AFF will be working towards addressing for the future.

CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The conference produced the following initial outcomes:

- The AFF provided the autonomous space which participants agreed should be

institutionalised on a biennial basis. National follow up forums have been planned in 2007 in 3 countries so far, namely Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria. The idea is to contextualise the deliberations at national level and to create national mechanisms for devolving the information and learning to local levels within each country.

- A Charter of Feminist Principles was agreed and adopted by the meeting. It was felt that this charter is an accountability mechanism for feminist organising on the continent. As such, the meeting agreed that it will be used as a tool for peer review amongst African feminist organisations. Secondly it was agreed that wide dissemination and popularisation of the charter was necessary as a critical and strategic movement building tool.

WITH REGARDS TO PUBLICATIONS AND MATERIALS THE FOLLOWING ARE IN LINE FOR DEVELOPMENT:

- The publication of the Charter and report of the deliberations.
- A bibliography of feminist activists on the continent in the form of an easy reference, coffee table style book.
- A documentary film of the AFF meeting
- A CD Rom picture gallery
- An AFF website has also been established on which is posted activities both at regional and national level related to the AFF.
- The AFF has already made formal links with other processes. A presentation of the AFF will be made at the Feminist Dialogues and The African NGO Summit both of which precede the World Social Forum in January 2007.

Discussions will centre on how linkages can be strengthened to create a wider network of actors for movement building purposes, and for the pooling of resources to ensure sustainable efforts. This will ensure that key feminist concerns from Africa are reflected in the proceedings.

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