

## Profile

### The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET): Experiences of Feminist Continental Organising [1]

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## Background

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) is a pan-African network that was set up by national women's networks in 1988 to co-ordinate African women's preparations for, and participation in, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, FEMNET is now in its seventeenth year of existence and has gone through both highs and lows, changing and evolving in the process.

FEMNET's current advocacy mandate is based on its initial mandate – to provide strategic information on regional and international policy processes relevant to African women at the national level, and to ensure that African women are able to make effective inputs into the negotiating processes from which these regional and international policies arise. FEMNET has thus worked consistently with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) during its annual sessions, which review progress on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It has also worked intermittently with other UN institutions, such as the World Conference against Racism (WCAR). More recently, it has moved into the area of global governance as a whole.

At the regional level, over the past five years, FEMNET has worked consistently with the African Union (AU) and its specialised mechanisms. In particular, the focus has been on the evolution, adoption and ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, on the Rights of Women in Africa, the evolution of the AU's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) and the AU's New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and its African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

In addition, FEMNET has developed three advocacy projects that seek to understand why there has been so little movement or progress in areas where regional and international policy commitments already exist. The first project addresses the relationship between culture, religion and women's human rights; the second focuses on gender and macroeconomic modelling; and the third addresses men's roles in promoting gender equality. (See Appendix for details.)

FEMNET has achieved much that is worth celebrating, not least that it is now in its 17th year of existence, and still going strong! Despite the ups and downs occasioned by personnel and financing changes over the years, as well as shifting relationships with peer organisations, FEMNET has weathered various storms and now commands the respect necessary to fulfil its mandate. It has also continued to find new niches into which the African women's movement can move. Its work on the current trend towards regional integration, the gaps seen in present economic justice efforts, and the challenging tensions between culture, religion and human rights all testify to this. Possibly most impressive is that FEMNET recognises and is negotiating its way through common divides found in African women's movements – linguistic, generational and ideological. FEMNET has a (relatively) young staff, which benefits from its (relatively) older Board members, despite the inevitable clashes. We are committed to mentoring the next generation. Finally, FEMNET is now prepared to describe itself as a feminist network, not least because it is finally willing and able to support the full range of reproductive and sexual rights, including the rights to choice in matters of sexuality, maternity and sexual orientation.

FEMNET's success is evident in the continued support it receives from its members, partners and peers. This enables its ongoing function as a co-ordinating mechanism between the regional and international policies of the African women's movement. This, in turn, has been pivotal in ensuring that key concerns of the African women's movement have been reflected in international policy.

To support its advocacy mandate, FEMNET also has a training and communication mandate. It developed a unique framework for gender mainstreaming, which was recently updated, and also pioneered training on how such frameworks can be applied for gender analysis mainstreaming in Africa. Training has been done with both members and the relevant ministries in national governments. The demand for training, as well as materials and tools, suggests the success of this mandate.

With respect to communication, FEMNET provides several channels through which it facilitates the exchange of information on women's human rights from international and regional levels to national levels, as well as across Africa. These include a monthly electronic bulletin, a tri-annual membership newsletter called FEMNET News, and a bi-annual thematic newsletter called Our Rights. In addition, FEMNET runs several listserves – some for its Board, national focal points and general membership, and others for its members and partners working on specific international and regional policy processes, such as the CSW and the AU.

If FEMNET's mandate has evolved over time, this is partly because its membership has evolved as well. Its initial membership has expanded from national women's networks to include both national organisations, most of which are women's organisations, and individuals, most of whom are women.

## **Challenges**

FEMNET has faced many challenges simply by virtue of being a network and, more specifically, a pan-African network.

A key challenge continues to be posed by the necessity of working across linguistic, sub-regional divides that are historically determined and often presented as conceptually or ideologically different. As yet, FEMNET has failed to determine the most effective institutional or structural arrangements to ensure that it functions as a genuinely pan-African network. These issues come to the fore, for example, when deciding whether an Anglophone (even if bilingual) Executive Director in an office based in Anglophone Africa can effectively serve Francophone Africa – let alone Arabophone and Lusophone Africa.

Although such challenges are largely perceptual, it is genuinely difficult to operate in a context that does not recognise regional organisations, to recruit bilingual staff at a regional level, to fundraise on a pan-African basis, and so on. Structural and logistical solutions to these challenges have been formulated and re-formulated throughout FEMNET's history, but an optimal solution has yet to be found. And it has to be asked whether these challenges can, in fact, be solved structurally and logistically, or whether they are at heart conceptual and ideological. To put it more directly, what are the prospects for a pan-African women's project in the context of such deep linguistic and sub-regional variations, particularly when those variations are reinforced both by the operational context of FEMNET's host country, and its uncertain funding prospects?

### ***Internal challenges***

Conceptual and ideological challenges exist internally as well. As with many African women's organisations, both national and pan-African, FEMNET has tended to assume that

working on gender and women's human rights pre-supposes a shared vision of African women's development, equality and other human rights. This assumption is false, and is further buttressed by persistent and misleading perceptions of African women's organisations and their leaders as being “elite” and “urban”.

Despite this, FEMNET has yet to develop a vision of openly-held principles shared and agreed upon by all members and staff, and to which they must adhere. On the one hand, this absence of a shared vision gives FEMNET's Board of Trustees, Executive Board and Regional Secretariat much room to manoeuvre, depending on the vision and principles of its Board members and staff at any given time. On the other hand, however, this lack means that FEMNET's staff and general members sometimes find themselves at odds with one another.

Although more and more African women's organisations are now prepared to term themselves “feminist” than was the case at the time of FEMNET's formation, “feminism” itself is not a homogenous belief system or political ideology. Many variations exist, all of which are subject to multiple interpretations, depending on what other belief systems and political ideologies are held.

Among African women's organisations, however, such ideological struggles have tended to be implicit rather than explicit, with the result that subtle yet vital distinctions are often lost. During the past decade, the dividing line between those who termed themselves “feminists” and those who did not identify themselves as such, was most evident between those who openly aligned themselves with movements for political pluralism across the continent, and those who did not. Currently and more practically, the dividing line between those who call themselves “feminists” and those that do not is most visibly drawn between those who are pro-choice and those who are not, and those who view sexual orientation as protected ground in respect of equality rights, and those who do not. In other words, it is around African women's bodily integrity, autonomy and choice, particularly with respect to reproductive and sexual rights, that the conflict over a shared vision is now emerging.

There are also internal structural challenges emanating from the diversity – in terms of capacity – among FEMNET's constituency. FEMNET's mandate focuses on advocacy concerning regional and international policy. It does not, and should not, advocate or provide services – beyond strategic information – at the national level, the assumption being that this should be the work of its national members. However, adherence to this mandate is hard to maintain across the continent, given the differing status and strengths of the various national women's movements. In practice, this necessitates constant management of the membership's expectations of FEMNET, ensuring that it remains relevant to its members' expressed needs without doing in one country what it cannot do in all.

Some logistical challenges also exist. FEMNET includes in its statement of purpose the intention to play a catalytic role with respect to issues that African states are unable or unwilling to address. In practice, however, FEMNET is constrained (like much of African civil society represented by non-governmental organisations or structures) by insufficient financial and human resources and limited funding. The question is whether an African women's movement – or any other African social movement – can be timely, and indeed viable, when forced to frame both proactive and reactive initiatives into programmes and projects that ensure that there is money and personnel to do what needs to be done.

### ***External challenges***

Given FEMNET's history, its relationships with African states – particularly the state in which it is based – have not been as fraught as might have been expected. Gender and women's human rights, although deeply threatening on an individual and community level, have not

been viewed as particularly threatening on a state level, and most African governments have believed themselves to be perfectly entitled to compromise women's human rights when pushed to do so by community (customary and religious) lobbies. As mentioned above, FEMNET was formed by national women's networks at the end of the 1980s, with most of these networks explicitly or otherwise linked to ruling political parties at the time.

It is only during the past decade that more autonomous African women's organisations have arisen, overtly aligning themselves with the democratic and human rights causes with which FEMNET, over the past five years, has also actively sought association. Even so, given that FEMNET works at the regional and international levels – where diplomatic policy negotiations are the order of the day, and where African civil society is generally able to make common cause with governments (particularly around issues of macroeconomics, debt, aid and trade) – it is clear that FEMNET has typically been far more able to maintain amicable and useful relationships with African governments than many of its national members and partners.

Similarly, apart from the challenge of finding grant-making organisations ready to invest in the pan-African women's project, FEMNET's relationships with such organisations have tended to be mutually beneficial. For example, FEMNET's core funding arrangement offers, by way of return, one month's advisory services to a key grant-making organisation. There are some organisations from which FEMNET will not accept funds (although this is based on FEMNET staff's ideological position rather than on any written policy).

With core funding and (relative) financial security in place, FEMNET has, at least at this moment in its history, the flexibility to concentrate its efforts according to its own priorities. While grant-making organisations now often approach FEMNET on the basis of its ongoing work, rather than vice versa, FEMNET has yet to decrease its dependency on such organisations; at present, it could not survive in its current form on the basis of membership contributions alone.

But perhaps the question is whether civil society organisations anywhere in the world can be financially sustainable; many in the West depend on corporate and public grants, for example. Although Africa may not yet be in a place – conceptually, financially or politically – to do the same, perhaps it is the typical view of sustainability that needs to be reviewed.

## **Conclusion**

That said, critique abounds as to the potential, approach to and effectiveness of FEMNET's activities. Much of this critique is justified. Given FEMNET's scope, but also considering how little progress has actually been made, it is clear that FEMNET's potential as a (feminist) pan-African network has yet to be realised. The question is, why? Is it due to FEMNET's mandate? Not really. As already discussed, the mandate is broad enough to be interpreted as necessary by the Board of Trustees, Executive Board and staff at any given time. Is it due to the influence of the Board of Trustees, Executive Board and staff? Maybe. In truth, consensus is rarely reached. Is it due to FEMNET's membership? Possibly. Being more institutionally than individually based, the allegiances of FEMNET members is often dependent on their own institutional needs at a specific moment. FEMNET is not necessarily seen as a vehicle through which to passionately engage with the pan-African (feminist) project; to debate similarities and differences in the analysis of our consciously adopted means and desired ends.

So maybe the answer to that question, at heart, lies with our own commitment to and passion for each other. You tell me.

## **Appendix: Overview of FEMNET's Programmes and Projects**

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) was set up in 1988 to share information, experiences, ideas and strategies among African women's NGOs through communications, networking, training and advocacy so as to advance women's development, equality and other women's human rights in Africa.

FEMNET is governed by a Constitution and the following governance and administrative structure:

- national focal points in African countries whose representatives attend a tri-annual programming conference and General Assembly;
- an elected eleven-member Executive Board, which includes two Board members per sub-region and a Chairperson. In addition, there are two Ex-Officio Board members (immediate past Chairperson and the Executive Director);
- an elected seven-member Board of Trustees to oversee FEMNET's assets; and
- a Secretariat that implements FEMNET's programmes and which is headed by an Executive Director.

Since its inception in 1988, FEMNET has played a leadership role for African women's NGOs at regional and international decision-making and policy forums. FEMNET works in three main programme areas, described below.

### **1. The Advocacy Programme**

The advocacy programme includes several projects designed to evolve approaches and methodologies for dealing with barriers to the implementation of the outcomes of the Beijing process.

#### ***Monitoring implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action***

Engaging with international gender organisations – notably the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) – is of increasing importance to African women. However, advocacy at the CSW by African women has been hindered by a number of factors. The aim of this project is therefore to improve the quality of African preparations for, engagement with and follow-up to the CSW sessions. The project seeks to initiate and enable a cohesive regional response by African women in civil society to the Beijing process. The project thus hopes to develop the capacity for advocacy and improve the quality of advocacy concerning African women's human rights on an international level.

#### ***Regional protection for African women's human rights: The African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the African Union***

Engaging with emerging regional institutions – notably the African Union (AU) and its African Commission on Human and People's Rights – is also of increasing importance to African women.

Two opportunities in this respect are worth noting: firstly, the intensified efforts for regional integration, as evidenced through the transitional process of the AU and its (contested) New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD); and secondly, the elaboration of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the appointment of the Special Rapporteur for Women's Human Rights at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights.

This project therefore seeks to initiate a cohesive regional response by African women to

regional integration, as evidenced through the AU's transitional process and regional legal protection mechanisms concerning the Protocol. The project will concretely address existing advocacy gaps by providing a framework for regional intervention as well as informed national intervention. Finally, the project aims to identify entry points for more long-term work on gender mainstreaming within the AU, so as to ensure the AU is able to proactively advance African women's human rights. By so doing, the project hopes to develop the capacity for advocacy concerning African women's human rights at the regional level.

### ***Culture, religion and human rights: African women's access to and control over land***

This project, implemented in partnership with the Law and Religion Program of Emory University, focuses on women's access to and control over land, seeking to both exemplify and address the project's core theme, which is to achieve cultural and religious transformation from a human rights perspective. The project also aims to link research and analysis with advocacy and thus contribute towards equalising gender relations in Africa, and to promote the ability of African women to achieve economic independence and realise other human rights.

This project therefore seeks to build a case for African women's land rights that takes into account their cultural and religious contexts in seven African countries. It also seeks to make policymaking and policy-enforcement mechanisms (including cultural and religious mechanisms) gender-responsive in terms of improving women's representation, and to engender both their content and their processes.

### ***Economic, social and cultural human rights: Gender mainstreaming implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers***

Many expected and unexpected problems arose from the formulation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) in Africa. It emerged that the consultations helped target expenditures more efficiently, but did not provide new insights into macroeconomic policy. The macroeconomic framework of the draft PRSPs therefore fails to acknowledge women's triple burden of work (productive, community, and reproductive) in national production. Subsequently, it does not recognise approaches to reduce this burden, economic rights commensurate with this burden, or measures to secure access to and control over economic resources for women.

Related to this, and a challenge to PRSP implementation, is the fact that the consultations did not affect economic reform agreements between respective governments and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These reforms and associated conditionalities were not subject to review by citizens of the country, and thus contradicted the PRSP. Existing macroeconomic arrangements need to be evaluated in light of the prevalence of poverty, particularly among women, and governments must be allowed to review these arrangements with lending institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, on the basis of this evaluation.

This project therefore seeks to document the experiences of gender lobbies in the PRSP process, and provide an analysis of women's poverty in direct relationship to the national macroeconomic policy. The project encourages the creation of national gender networks that influence the national budget through economic literacy among civil society organisations. The project also seeks to develop gender awareness among economists and economic planners.

### ***The regional Men-to-Men Project***

The gender approach to dealing with the issue of violence requires an analysis of its root

causes. This has revealed that men are the key perpetrators of violence and that women are the principal survivors and victims. In the past, interventions have tended to focus on the survivors and victims of violence: women. However, as the dynamics of the problem have become clearer, it has become evident that men must also be addressed.

FEMNET has worked with men in the gender training programmes throughout the last decade, and has identified partnerships with men as key to achieving gender equality and eliminating gender-based discriminatory attitudes, behaviour and practices. FEMNET has proposed to mobilise men to support the campaign for the elimination of gender-based violence. Such efforts have already begun in several countries, including Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Based on these experiences, FEMNET hopes to organise a regional initiative to involve men as advocates for the elimination of gender-based violence. The project therefore aims to create teams of male advocates of gender equality, and societies free of violence against women, in several African countries.

## **2. The Training Programme**

FEMNET has developed a model for instructing trainers in gender mainstreaming, which is applicable to the twelve priority areas outlined in the African and Beijing Platforms for Action. The model has been tested at the national level in a number of African states and is currently being developed so as to more explicitly address sectoral concerns.

To better implement the outcomes of the Beijing process, the current training programme targets civil society, governments and inter-governmental representatives involved in gender mainstreaming, who will communicate this work to wider audiences.

## **3. The Communications Programme**

FEMNET produces a monthly electronic bulletin, as well as two newsletters (all available in both English and French) for its membership. FEMNET News focuses on sharing membership experiences of and strategies for African women's development and equality. Our Rights includes analyses of gender and women's human rights issues in Africa.

FEMNET has established a website at <http://www.femnet.or.ke>, which is updated quarterly. One of FEMNET's priorities is to access and use new information and communications technologies (ICTs) for better membership networking and more effective advocacy, as is evident in the growing number of listserves it runs.

FEMNET also runs a documentation centre specialising in materials related to gender in Africa. Academics, researchers and students, as well as African NGOs and CBOs are regular visitors to this centre.

The current communications programme also focuses on communications for advocacy. Even within organised civil society, African women still lack the means to share strategic information on initiatives addressing the advocacy problems outlined above. Sharing the lessons learnt from these initiatives – from the community to the diplomatic level – is still rare, has proven to be difficult and has not tended to be met with the participation of the constituencies served by African women's CBOs and NGOs.

This project thus focuses on improving the content and capacity of information and communications around gender in Africa by enabling the collection, analysis and dissemination of strategic information. The management, production and dissemination of strategic information on the outcomes of the Beijing process, as they pertain to African women, is also part of this project. The project seeks to extract and popularise concerns and

proposals for action in the five critical areas of concern through the print and electronic media. In so doing, the project seeks to exemplify the use of participatory communications for advocacy to advance the concerns and solutions of African women.

#### **Footnote**

[1] This contribution is based on a presentation made in October 2004 at a conference organised by the Faculty of Law, Buffalo University and Mazingira Institute on emergent human rights themes in east Africa. It forms the basis of a larger paper, to be published in 2005 by the organisers of the conference.

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