

Feeding Freedom's Hunger: Reflections on the second African Feminist Forum

Jessica Horn

*she is milk feeding
freedom's hunger, starlight
in rebellion's sky*

There is something magical about a gathering of African feminists: rooms filled with the breath and radiant minds of women seeking more nourishing landscapes of social existence and more liberating forms of political and cultural expression. It is the earthly magic of women's collective resistance, inhabiting a kaleidoscope of earthly bodies: programme officer, photographer, professor, parliamentarian, donor, grandmother, sex worker, heterosexual, lesbian, differently abled...

The second African Feminist Forum (AFF) was held in Kampala, Uganda from 17-21 September 2008 and attended by over 130 feminists from all walks of life and locations in Africa and its migrant Diasporas¹. The theme "Feminist Power, Agency and Resistance: New Visions for a Revitalised Continent", proved a prophetic choice given the backdrop against which discussions were staged: post-election crises in Kenya and Zimbabwe, the forced resignation of South African President Thabo Mbeki, and growing state fundamentalism, censorship and public harassment of feminists and sexual rights activists in Uganda itself.

Forum discussions were organised around four thematic clusters: political and economic power, knowledge production and creative expression, bodily integrity and autonomy, and movements and organisations. Perhaps due to the rarity of such a large feminist gathering in Africa, the agenda itself was packed with activities, from formal plenaries and workshops to book launches, poetry readings and talk shows. Over the four days, participants used these diverse formats to assess the state of the region from a feminist perspective

and shared examples of feminist resistance in academia, policy, and society at large. Participants also raised questions about the efficacy of feminist responses and modes of mobilisation, and levels of resources available for transformative work. Echoing the sentiment of much of these conversations, South African feminist Pregs Govender asked “how *do* we vision and how do we dream again?”

About the African Feminist Forum

“This is not a forum for feminists ‘if’, ‘but’ or ‘however’. This is a forum for feminists, full stop.” – Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, AFE Participant, Nigeria

The AFF is a regional platform developed by a working group of independent feminist activists and launched in Accra, Ghana in 2006. It is a collective of individual activists, rather than an organisation, and is anchored by a secretariat currently based at the African Women’s Development Fund in Ghana and, biennially, by the feminist institution that hosts the regional meeting. The AFF was designed as a medium for sharing African feminist thought and practice, providing “safe spaces” for critical reflection on personal and collective progress, and a springboard for action. The regional forum has already stimulated a number of related initiatives including an AFF website and the establishment of national feminist forums in Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana. People participate in the regional forum and its sister initiatives in their personal capacity. This was an intentional strategy to enable individuals to share and grow their activist beliefs and commitments beyond the limitations of their institutional positions or roles. It also means that the AFF itself is not “owned” by any particular institution, but rather by the collective commitment and energy of those who participate. The AFF is a political platform. As such, all participants must publicly identify as feminists, and sign the Charter of Feminist Principles, which outlines an ethical framework for African feminist engagement based on principles of human rights, choice, non-discrimination and individual and collective accountability.

Bodies, Bodies, Bodies

“The vagina is what goes into law, is attacked by culture...” – Musimbi Kanyoro, AFF Participant, Kenya/USA

“The point is now, in all our communities, people are wearing the hijab.”

– Doaa Abdelaal, AFF participant, Egypt

The politics of the body permeated forum discussions, as participants confirmed the feminist truism that women’s bodies are a site of struggle, a

source of creativity, and a target for attack in mainstream culture, religion and politics. Participants dove head-first into the many silences and oppressions framing African women's bodies, challenging the conservative mantra that anything enabling women's bodily integrity and autonomy is "unAfrican, ungodly and immoral". Feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro highlighted the fact that while many African policy makers refuse to fully legalise abortion, much of the early documented information on abortifacients was gathered from North African doctors. Other participants conferred that knowledge of herbal abortifacients forms part of women's reproductive knowledge in their cultures. Many participants referenced the growing influence of religious institutions, in particular new charismatic Christian churches, in demonising these forms of knowledge while actively campaigning against measures to protect women from violence and enable sexual and reproductive choice. The need for tactical, consolidated activism in this area was deemed urgent. As Zimbabwean girl's rights activist Betty Makoni asked in the face of ongoing sexual abuse, "how do we organise to protect the sovereignty of our vaginas"?

The AFF is one of the few regional forums to actively embrace sexual diversity and take a public stance against homophobia in African women's organising and in broader society. This solidarity was vocally expressed by heterosexual activists, and appreciated by lesbian and bisexual feminists participating, who saw the AFF as an the opportunity to move the debate beyond moral judgments to a more productive engagement with the politics of sexuality. The topic of sexuality was not comfortable terrain for all, however the safe space created at the forum allowed for this necessary dialogue. As Ugandan human rights defender Sylvia Tamale put it, we need to "remove the moral veil, get out of our comfort zones and reorganise old belief systems".

Feminist Visions of Democracy

"We don't need a gun, we need brains now."– Margaret Dongo, AFF

Participant, Zimbabwe

Halfway through the forum participants heard reports of the resignation of Thabo Mbeki. The news sparked a process of collective commiseration at the prospect of unabashed sexist Jacob Zuma leading one of Africa's economic and political powerhouses. It also added fuel to the fire of discussions around tackling Africa's "democratic recession", the betrayal of African citizens by their own states, and the re-entrenchment of militarism and state chauvinism. Reflecting on Kenya's recent history, human rights activist Muthoni Wanyeki

expressed, “These travesties are happening in the backyards of those countries that are supposed to be at the forefront of our so-called second liberation”. Participants interrogated the success of models they have used to champion women’s political participation, and agreed on the need for feminists (and not just women) to take their place in public decision-making. A dialogue also began around the near blanket acceptance of neoliberal economics by African governments and the implications for national and individual economic autonomy. As Nigerian academic Ayesha Imam provoked, “These models have not even worked for most men, let alone most women”.

Creative Subversions

“When one is an artist, one has to dare”– Fatoumata Kinda, AFF Participant, Burkina Faso

Both in its methodology and content, the second AFF aimed to stimulate creativity as an essential force for change. In the words of Kenyan feminist Atsango Chesoni, creative expression is a powerful means of practicing “the psychology of liberation”. In a session on women’s writing, participants were surprised to find a common difficulty with writing about themselves and in the first person. This made visible the impact of patriarchal power in censoring and devalourising women’s own individual experience and voice. Speaking about the embattled place of feminism in the academy, Senegalese professor Fatou Sow commented that “feminist knowledge is [still] not perceived as scholarly. It is a site where you are always having to prove yourself and that what you are doing is ‘scientific’ and ‘valuable’”. Despite these myriad forms of silencing women’s expression, a range of beautiful and subversive expressions emerged and were shared by women at the forum. These included an account by Senegalese writer Aissatou Cisse of the writing workshops she runs for marginalised girls to help them write their own stories, a practice unheard of in a context where girls are not even expected see a world beyond the kitchen. Many forum participants affirmed the critical need to document and share oral and written herstories, in particular the stories of kinswomen and feminist “ancestors” as a means of retaining our collective memory and learning from the rich resource of women’s knowledge.

Looking in the Mirror

“We have to start from the basic understanding that values are to be lived”– Pate Made, AFF Participant, Zimbabwe

At many points during the AFF, participants engaged in collective self-critique. This was framed by premise that the work of feminism is not only for transformation of broader society, but also the transformation of how we deal with each other as individuals and within our organisations and movements. Far from navel-gazing, the discussions allowed for necessary scrutiny around feminist priorities, the effects of “NGO-isation” on feminist activism, and issues of inclusivity, diversity and sustainability. This self-critique was made live in a mock trial, in which the African feminist movement faced charges of irrelevance, elitism and inefficacy. The trial was conducted with a defence and prosecution team made up of the region’s finest lawyers and a number of newly found acting talents. In another plenary session, participants staged a debate around the question: “Can men be feminists and involved in the African feminist movement”. The debate called into question the growing numbers of men being hired by African women’s organisations, working as gender experts and raising funds for work on women’s empowerment and rights. The room was electric, with the team debating against the motion benefiting from majority support in the audience. Arguments included the assertion that a movement based on women’s lived experience of sexism could not be led by those who have never experienced it, and the desperate defence that “if there are no men in our movement, who will make the tea?”.

While provoking a great deal of laughter, these two sessions instigated discourse around pressing questions facing African feminists. Among these were the questions of whether our interventions are accessible or even relevant to a broader constituency, where we choose to place our institutional resources and energies, how to navigate donor pressures and stay true to our agendas, and navigating the difference between “doing gender” and engaging in feminist work. Alongside institutional politics, forum participants were encouraged to reflect on the politics of their own well-being and to see self-care as central to sustainable activism. We were invited to learn feminist massage, and to think about our own financial, spiritual and emotional health.

Building Regional Sisterhood

“Out there she seeks to know who her fellow travellers are”– Demere
Kitunga, AFF Participant, Tanzania

The second African Feminist Forum provided confirmation that feminism in Africa is indeed alive, diverse and infectious! It also established one more

space available for the urgent work of African feminism to consolidate and spread. As with any process of mobilisation and change, there is always a lot more to do. Those who have organised national feminist forums in Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana are committed to sustaining the processes that they have created. Discussions are also underway amongst participants from other countries (including Kenya), around initiating their own national feminist forums. Other spin-off initiatives are in gestation, including an online resource on African feminist art and an accessible “Feminism 101” guide for people new to feminist thought. The AFF is as relevant and vibrant as the people that constitute it. The work is in our hands, and it is with our hands that African feminist thought and practice will flourish, and ultimately succeed in transforming mainstream consciousness on our continent.

For more information on the African Feminist Forum and to read the Charter of Feminist Principles visit www.africanfeministforum.org

Endnote

1. The forum was hosted by Akina Mama wa Afrika, a Kampala-based organisation that has worked for over two decades to build feminist leadership across the African continent and among African women in Europe.