

## Akosua Adomako Ampofo



### African Feminist Thinkers: Our Voices [1]

Thanks to my parents I was nurtured into activism from a tender age just watching them speak and act out against social injustice in simple, everyday situations. They would persist even when it meant standing alone. I developed a consciousness about 'justice?', even when the issues were ones I did not necessarily agree with or support. I went to an all-girls secondary school and there two of my teachers stand out as encouraging independent thinking. Ms Owen, my form three English teacher, was a diminutive young woman who enjoyed my compositions and indicated it was alright to write about anything. She was also young, pretty, single and independent. Then in early adulthood I began to recognize my feminist self albeit in less deliberate ways. However, after my Christian conversion in 1980, I had, for a few years, been grappling with some disillusionment around socialism. (My family had CPP roots and as an adolescent and young adult, I had unconsciously chosen as friends people with a socialist or leftist inclinations). Socialists, I was discovering however, are, like all human beings, basically that 'human!' Which means they are flawed, selfish, greedy, callous like everyone else. Through becoming a Christian I accepted that no matter how wonderful a system or ideology is, its positive abilities are muted by the human factor, which, in Christian doctrine, is referred to as sinfulness! This was wonderfully liberating as Christianity provided the opportunity for the forgiveness of sin as well as the opportunity to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. And Christ, I had discovered, did not privilege any race, class, or sex above another; as Paul said, 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but you are all one in Christ.' Christ contested the status quo. He rejected the formalized religion that put people in bondage to traditions. He was not afraid to stand up to oppressive authorities. And, in many recorded instances he set women free from religious traditions.

In 1990, hooking in to the vision of my senior colleague and sister, Takyiwaa Manuh, the Development and Women's Studies Programme (DAWS) was born within the Institute of African Studies. DAWS was set up in 1989/1990 as part of efforts to build the institutional capacity of the IAS to address development and women's concerns in Ghana through research and teaching and by drawing on the multi-disciplinary traditions of the Institute. The objectives of DAWS are to contribute to the development of women and gender studies as an academic discipline through research and teaching. It also aims at formulating meaningful theoretical frameworks and appropriate methodologies for studying development and gender issues in Ghana. Further, DAWS aims at influencing the work of policy-making organizations concerned with development and gender issues through action-oriented research

and dialogue.

## Reflections

Being a feminist activist, for me, has meant consciously working for transformations in laws, policies, structures, practices and ? most importantly ? ideologies that, individually or collectively, cause women to be valued less and/or to enjoy more limited access to earth?s resources and blessings than men. Thus one of my major goals remains to work as an instrument in bringing about release for both women and men from traditions, practices and beliefs that force them to behave in oppressive ways or that lead them to become the objects of oppression. Thus, an important site for activism is the church as an institution, where it is my prayer that women will be released from the bondage of church traditions and practices that bind them to a lesser status and subordinate roles. Whenever I can I seize the opportunity to speak to young people, especially young women, to encourage, exhort and build up confidence to challenge injustice and gender inequality. As time and energy permit I also commit to organizations, positions and activities that seek to improve women?s lives. For example, I am a resource person for the Ark Foundation and WISE, two organizations that address issues of gender-based violence and women?s empowerment through training and counseling.

Thus, for me a major site for activism is the classroom ? I see my university teaching, especially Masters courses in Gender at the Institute of African Studies that I have taught since the mid 1990s, as an opportunity to expose my students to scholarly work that can show how, and why, gender relations have come to be constructed in the ways they are. In all my courses I also seek to show how contemporary systems and institutions such as the state, religion, economic paradigms and institutions, etc, reinforce gender inequalities. And then I seek to challenge students to suggest ways in which these systems can be interrogated and gender inequalities addressed and hopefully dismantled. One of my most fulfilling years has been teaching a graduate class composed entirely of men a course on ?Men and Masculinity? and, not only watching their personal transformations, but learning more about masculinity from my shared experiences with them in the classroom.

As an academic my research and publications also address the issue of gender inequality, and I try to contest theories, positions and prescriptions that are not in the interest of women?s well being and egalitarian gender relations. My specific areas of interest within this context include the Gendering of Identity Formations; Masculinity & Femininity; Marital Power and Decision-making; Gender and Violence; Sexual and Reproductive behaviour; Reproductive decision making; HIV/AIDS; Sexual exploitation; the global sex industry.

I am not sure where my ensuing time on earth will take me. However I anticipate continuing my activism in the classroom, the church, and with sisters and brothers in civil society organizations. Increasingly I am finding greater opportunity to dialogue in international spaces where I can learn and share perspectives on how gender is conflated with, not only race and class, but also the impacts of globalisation and being in the Third World. In 2004 I was among a group of 28 women and two men selected from around the world as a Fulbright New Century Scholar. The theme for 2004/2005 is ?The Global Empowerment of Women? and within that context my own research looks at the socialization of young people in Ghana and the ways in which they contest or reproduce patriarchy. At our first meeting in Atlanta, GA , in April 2004 it hit me home again that women are disadvantaged in similar ways across the globe, but also that there are many ways in which Third World women?s marginaliation is (re)inscribed via ?globalisation.? So, in the coming years I hope that I can continue to serve

women by engaging in dialogue across the global divides.

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The African Gender Institute is a research grouping within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town University of Cape Town

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