

# a new place, a new self

## The Challenges and Prospects for the African Women's Movement in the 21st Century

by Patricia McFadden



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frican women have been an important and increasingly visible part of modern African political life. We participated in anticolonial struggles as trade unionists, political leaders, wives and mothers—often in the more traditional ways that women have entered politics. But we have also made fundamental changes to the body politic of Africa in very significant ways:

1) By engaging in anticolonial struggles, we introduced gender into African politics, though largely through forms sanctioned by men, and often our entry was through the patronage of men. African women have fought patriarchy and male privilege for centuries. By involving ourselves in the anticolonial resistance, we crossed over the very boundaries which had constructed politics as a male preserve. Our presence in these movements, our rejection of women's traditional status, was met with resentment and resistance. But African politics is bound to change as we recognize that women are a political force and we are needed to change the course of this continent.

2) We have a troubled relationship with Nationalism, in the sense that often, it is our loyalty to the men who inherited the state at independence (brothers, husbands, uncles, friends) that determines our first reaction when a critical issue arises—rather than a critical feminist perspective.

3) Women's participation in the armed resistance became a critical part of the construction of new identities and relationships with the state and civil society, but some of these new relationships are problematical. We need to interrogate the identities we are inheriting and/

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or constructing: are they productive? are they good and strong? are they rooted in healthy traditions or in very masculinist, androcentric traditions?

4) African women still do not recognize that we are a political movement. We still behave like ladies at a tea party, and we are often shocked when men are brutal and violent towards us. We need to understand the true nature of politics so that we can change it.

In my view, our activism is grounded in four critical elements which I would like to share with you.

One, our Africanness is defined by and through a patriarchal norm which defines Africans through the male. The establishment of authenticity for African women has to become a central tenet of the African Women's Movement in the 21st century. We must not have to derive and or reflect Africanness through any male.

Two, there is the struggle to regain our female identity. African women have no personhood or bodily integrity as an established and recognised norm in any of our societies. Women experience gender violence all the time, female children in particular. It seems so inexplicable. I suggest that the concepts of personhood and bodily integrity can help us understand gender violence in all its manifes-

tations, sexual abuse as well as mutilation. We need new thinking tools, new activist tools in whose design and formulation we are a part of.

Next is our welfarist participation in national projects. Increasingly, the African Women's Movement's programs are oriented to fill the gaps created by Structural Adjustment Programs in our societies. We are taking over responsibilities which the state should be shouldering, and we are not asking ourselves whether this is our agenda or if it is an imposed agenda. Female nurturing can easily become a trap...we need to understand the limits of our nurturing, where we should draw the line in relation to the responsibilities which men must assume, and especially men who traffic in the state.

Finally, there is the question of our relationship with African men; even more critically, we need to ask them to take the responsibility of changing themselves. As political activists, are we going to reproduce the stereotypes of African women on batiks and tapestries sold in the curio shops, the stereotypes of us as either pregnant, carrying a baby on our backs, or both? While African men are represented through images of dancers and musicians, why can't we see African women doing other things besides being birthers and reproducers?

#### **AND BEYOND OUR ACTIVISM, WHAT DO WE SEE AROUND US?**

Today, we are experiencing the end of the welfare programs which opened doors for us as women. For the first time in our known story, African women had the ability and the spaces to think together and strategize collectively, because we had programs which recognized the deprivation caused by five centuries of the plunder of this continent. And yet in all of Africa, the doors to opportunity through education, basic health care, accessible and affordable transportation and shelter, basic security to livelihoods, are being shut in the face of the next generation.

Structural Adjustment is reversing the minimal gains which we had begun to make as women these past three decades. In fact, of all the continents, Africa least enjoys the surplus which is universally produced through human productivity; and yet it is the most materially and culturally endowed. The African Women's Movement must face the social, political, economic and cultural issues arising from

macroeconomic policies which are imposed upon us and which are weakening the civil society, and weakening and redirecting the Women's Movement as well.

Africa is struggling with a heavy debt burden which, as we all know, plays itself out in the lives of women, especially poor women. On the other hand, there is a very clear connection between the debt and military spending. In all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, there is clear evidence that almost half of national revenues are spent on the purchase of arms (look at Zimbabwe and Uganda ), while almost 60 percent of foreign exchange generated leaves

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the region in debt-repayment. Those at the helm of the African state are using the bulk of our national resources to arm themselves to the teeth. There may be very good reasons, in their view, to do so. But I will never be convinced that any argument for military spending is better than putting in place the fundamentals for sustainable development.

And finally, even as we know that it is in women's lives and on women's bodies that the consequences of civil strife are played out—there are no effective mechanisms today which will bring to book those men who rape and plunder women's physical, sexual and emotional integrity, across the continent and in many parts of the world. Most of the time one feels so overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness when one witnesses the degradation of women's bodies becoming the open fields where men play with their toy guns and penises...We need to do something, but first we must understand what it is which allows them to do it with impunity. The genocide and ethnic violence unleashed against women, children and poor men is a critical issue for all who are concerned with crafting a new society, and it is directly linked with militarization and a fundamental disregard and disrespect for human

rights.

Around us are numerous cases of failed leadership, dictatorships, intolerance... the failure to secure the most basic rights and needs for Africans, especially for women and children... structures like the OAU [Organization of African Unity] which are completely inefficient and paralyzed and yet they claim to represent the continent... corruption and mismanagement of whatever resources remain... a health crisis which basically shuts down the discourse on our reproductive rights and health.

The crisis of AIDS touches us all, and the African Women's Movement has been, for the longest time, the only effective agent in terms of responding to HIV/AIDS. We have held up the torch in raising issues of confidentiality, access to care, respect for people's dignity and the responsibilities of the state towards AIDS sufferers. Maternal mortality and infant deaths are rising everywhere on the continent, at the end of a century which has witnessed incredible advances in all spheres of human progress. Partly because we are faced with the critical imperatives of staying alive we are not even talking about reproductive rights in the African Women's Movement. We are told by our governments, pushed by the international lobby, that we have to control population growth because



McFadden to African women:  
Dare you? Dare us all?

Africans are now healthier and living longer. Yet we know that for the majority of Africans, better health is not happening. We are increasingly unwell, mentally and physically and this has major implications for the future existence of this continent. But poverty denies women the space and voice to articulate their needs beyond sheer survival. Poverty has become a very effective silencing mechanism.

So, these are some of the most critical issues. Among the newer scourges is religious fundamentalism. In my perspective, right-wing

fundamentalism has unleashed a vicious backlash against African activists who name themselves feminist and who express a feminist agenda, and, who challenges the sacrosanct canons of organized, white-controlled religion.

The challenges which derive from this context are monumental, but before I set out some challenges, we need to identify who we are as the African Women's Movement. As I said, the Women's Movement is my home, and I would never leave it under any circumstances. Even

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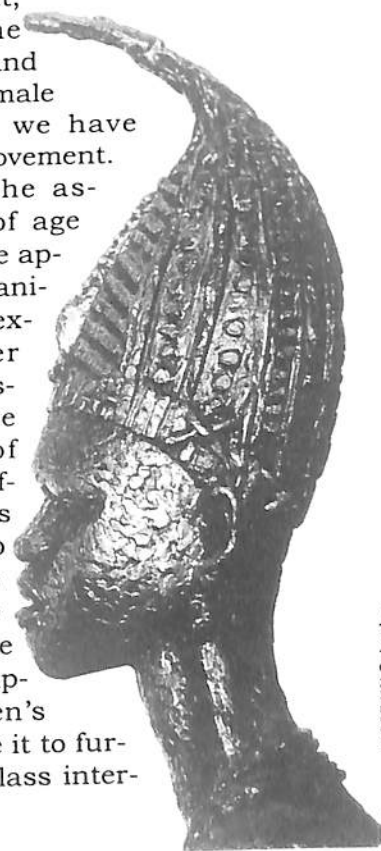
when I feel that I am perishing from the nastiness and the burden of resistance, I stay, because there is no other place I would rather be.

When I look at the African Women's Movement, I see two major characteristics; one is our diversity; the other is our differences. We reflect the diversity and the beauty of the continent—in our dress and the colors that we come in, as Black women; in our strengths—we have survived wars, famines, droughts, slavery; and we have to celebrate this ability to survive the worst that has been unleashed on us for most of modern history. We have wonderful nurturing traditions. All you have to do is look into the Movement: when there is pain, we run to catch, to nurture, to comfort. We have kept these abilities and strengths, and even in our societies, we are the caregivers.

From our foremothers we have inherited wisdom in healing, music and the arts, in conflict resolution. African women were among the first producers, the first agriculturists of the world, yet very few young women know this. When we see the statistics in the UN bulletins showing that African women feed the continent, we need to stop and ask how we have been able to do that, given all the odds. And of course, there is our dignity as African women, which we proudly pass on to our daughters. These are the treasures which cement the African Women's Movement. We bond whenever we meet, and this is very special, this is the strength which will enable us to deal with the differences.

Because there is the other part of the character of the African Women's Movement—our historical differences which express themselves in several ways that we need to understand. For one, our differing relationships with men and with the state, seen in a historical perspective, across our various cultures. There is too little known about how African women were/are in relation to the African state: precolonial, colonial and post-colonial. Secondly, we mirror the different faces of the same patriarchal culture, and often we see ourselves as the custodians, in fact the main gatekeepers of African patriarchy, through culture. We derive our identity from it. For many of the older activists who are so deeply embedded in their roles as gatekeepers, it is too painful to think of the possibility that they may have to change. But the baton has to be handed over to the young women so that they may construct a new African cultural identity that will challenge African patriarchy in all its forms.

Geographically we are located in separate spaces; we often look different even though we are the same people, and sometimes those looks are used to divide us. But there are two differences which concern me most in the Women's Movement, and these are the differences of age and the undemocratic male traditions which we have brought into the movement. We have taken the assumed privilege of age uncritically and are applying it in our organizations, thereby excluding younger women from the discourse and the management of power. The other difference is the class issue. We belong to different classes and we should be able to discuss the ways in which we approach the Women's Movement and use it to further our specific class interests.



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## **WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AS WE ENTER THE NEW MILLENNIUM?**

Primarily, for me as an activist in the Women's Movement (and every day I remind myself that I am a feminist activist) the most critical issue at all times is making the personal political. Sometimes I get so tired of the anger and the hostility which comes through because I name myself feminist and I work in a place called Feminist Studies Centre. Nevertheless we have to take the step to make the personal political. If we continue to separate the private from the public, our Movement will die, and we will be wrapped up in welfarism, catering to everyone else's needs. We will never reach our political goals.

There are several ways of doing this, and I would like to suggest a few. We have to interrogate the customs and socializing rituals which have shaped our identities as women. The rituals through which we are named, which inscribe messages on our bodies, which put us in little dark rooms and make us vulnerable to disempowerment. We all know those rituals. I know that human society cannot function without rituals; in fact, human beings are totally ritualised; we are hooked on the stuff. But it is what we do with rituals which concerns me; how ritual as a process facilitates power relations.

The other way in which we can make the personal political is to realize that our private lives are a political matter when we become leaders. For as long as a woman does not assume the title of leader, she may be able to claim that her private life is not our business. But once she assumes a leadership position, we must be able to take her to task about her private life. All feminist leaders should be subjected to the same principles. In this way, we demystify the boundaries which have been drawn between what is private and what is public. The way in which we live our private lives reflects itself in the broader Movement, and if we are oppressed in private, this stifles the political energies of the Movement. If the man you live with rapes and batters you, there is no way you as a leader will be able to articulate the issues of sexual violation, because subjectively you are violated. And I am unconvinced that there is no connection between these two worlds. So, making the personal political means bringing new energies into the Movement; changing the politics of the

Movement and moving to a new place, restructuring our relationships with the men and women whom we live—whether these are sexual, working or parenting relationships. This is critical.

The next challenge is to understand and engage those issues which underlie the tensions among us—the class differences which reflect very clearly in the structures we have built. Although we have to learn to build bridges across our class differences, ideological differences cannot be wished away. Radical feminists in the Movement are not going to go away, and no one who can tell me that the African Women's Movement is only for moderate and conservative women; not when I work 25 hours a day in that Movement. So, the ideological differences have to be confronted. And while it must be understood that we all bring something beautiful and important to the Movement, what is even more important is what we do with what we bring in.

Feminism is a critical force for our transformation. We must have the courage to name ourselves in new ways, to reflect the new locations and new agendas we bring to national and global struggles, to create solidarity platforms through which we can contest, celebrate and envision our new directions, to interrogate and challenge ageism and the privilege and authoritarianism associated with it.

In many ways the African Women's Movement reflects the crisis wrecking the broader society around us. For me this presents a unique opportunity which coincides with the end of a millennium and the end of a century, and the beginning of a new millennium. Of course there is much pain associated with this change; some of us have had to leave the Movement after many years of dedicated commitment to the struggle for women's rights and this has put us into a personal/political crisis.

The African Women's Movement therefore has to move from the old status quo—where our politics and identity were too closely tied to androcentric notions of nationalism and nurturing, to status which remain oppressive and exclusionary of women's rights and entitlements. It has to move to a new place, where we recognize that we are a political force, that sisterhood is no longer adequate as a construct to deal with the differences and the new challenges, and that this is the only movement

which can give leadership to a new African political agenda for the future.

The question then is—how do we learn to let go of “our babies”? how do we learn to manage power in a dignified way, to understand power and to position ourselves within the exercise of that power? We need to democratize our structures and institutional processes and to recognize the critical centrality of newness as represented by the ideas, perspectives and the presence of young African women in the Movement. That is the key and we must harness it without trying to own it. We must also unload the autocratic, male traditions which keep us back and feed the generational tensions and divisions in the Movement.

### Feminism is a critical force for our transformation.

Concerning our participation in the Global Women’s Movement, we must redefine the ways in which we enter and participate in it, and challenge the exoticization and objectification of African women in our sexuality and poverty. To carve out an intellectual space and voice for ourselves and to demand respect for who we are and what we bring to the struggle for a different kind of world...A very important part of the challenge is living up to the standards which we ourselves have set. To challenge racial privilege in the Global Women’s Movement is another task.

Fifthly, we must become scholars and intellectuals in our right. That is the cutting edge. We must bring African traditions of thinking and problem solving to the Global Women’s Movement and participate in the formulation of new theories and methodologies. We are bright and intelligent; we must write about ourselves and speak for ourselves. I am sick and tired of being written for and about; let us say it the way we want to say it. Let us know the new theories and contest the production and processing of knowledge. We can no longer be decorations in the Global Women’s Movement, the exotica in our beautiful clothes. We must be our own spokespersons and not allow anyone to appropriate our experiences or our voices.

#### **PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE**

The prospects for our future are very good,

living as we do on the most materially and humanly endowed continent on the planet earth. Besides, we have had too much experience with pain to even hesitate about choosing about a different tomorrow. We have nothing to lose by envisioning and crafting a new future, and we have every reason to want something different for Africa in the 21st century.

So whatever we take from the past, let us be very discriminating and take only that which will enable us to shape an agenda, an identity that will reflect new ideals and new traditions. Let me warn you, as an older feminist—and I hope the goddess will keep me until I am more than a hundred years old—that the backlash will be real and difficult to withstand. It is vicious and ever-present: patriarchy can be so hegemonic and overwhelming...the isolation, the threats, the violence, in some cases the murder of feminists...the Otherness and the marginalization.

But we have to take it as it comes, and make the Women’s Movement a political movement, redefining ourselves as political agents, strengthening and using the Movement to take this continent to a new place. The potential for this has to be unleashed through a process of feminist political discourse and by having the courage to accept this imperative on the part of the feminist leaders.

I conclude by welcoming you all to the Women’s Movement...to the process of naming yourself differently, of constructing new identities. Remember that your best traveling companion as you take up the journey as a feminist will be your love for Women. That is where you have to start. ♪

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