

# The African Feminist Forum: Beginnings

by L. Muthoni Wanyeki

## Why an African Feminist Forum?

The African Feminist Forum (AFF), convened in Accra, Ghana in November 2006 was both a significant moment and process. For the first time ever, it brought together over 120 self-defined African feminists to autonomously debate—with creativity, passion and rigour—analysis and strategies of the African women's movement. It was also the culmination of efforts over several years to create an extraordinary kind of reflective space—and we intend it to continue.

Africa is immense. While its states share a colonial past, the weight of international development financing, trade, and investment agreements and movements towards enhanced democracy are also diverse and uneven. These diversities in both pre- and post-independence Africa are many. For those working in the African women's movement, the opportunities to share experiences across the continent are few and far between, usually provided by

meetings of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) where the focus is on advocacy around those IGOs or by meetings convened by African women's organisations working in specific thematic sectors.

The adoption by African states of gender mainstreaming as the key strategy to advance African women's human rights has paradoxically made visible and invisible African feminist perspectives in the analysis of issues and the plotting of strategies by the African women's movement. This has been reinforced by a similar stance by the bilateral and multilateral development financing institutions which support these states. But gaps remain in several important areas. While there exists a growing body of feminist theory and African feminist scholarship, it is rare that such scholarship informs the analysis and strategies of the African women's movement. While the amount of artistic and creative work by African cultural producers that tackles issues from African feminist perspectives has been growing, substantive linkages among them and the African women's movement have yet to be made.



*L. Muthoni Wanyeki at the Press Conference of the Feminist Dialogues in Nairobi, Kenya.*

Many contradictions abound—between analysis and strategies, as well as between strategies adopted in different thematic sectors. Unresolved questions also plague relations with African states—and methodologies to advance concrete, legal, policy and practice reform in favour of African women’s human rights. There are even more vexed questions about constituencies of the African women’s movement and how best to revitalise mass conscientisation and organisation in our own best interests.

Thus, the idea of the AFF—to bring together self-identified African feminists to critically explore where, from its analysis and strategies, the African women’s movement is headed.

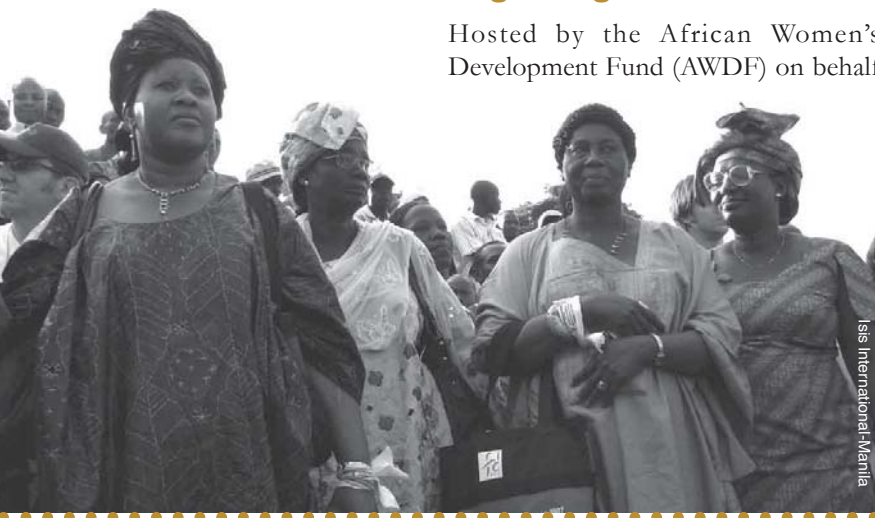
### Organising the AFF

Hosted by the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF) on behalf

of a small coordinating group from around the continent, the AFF was by invitation only—from a list compiled by the coordinating group and collectively assessed against previously defined criteria. The aim was not to be representative, although efforts were made to ensure diversity among the participants as concerns the activist/academic divide, age, language, sexual orientation and others. The aim was instead to bring together the most influential and interesting activists and thinkers of the African women’s movement—provided that they were known to self-identify as **feminist** and were not known to have contravened any of the criteria agreed upon. In this way, the AFF hoped to catalyse a nucleus of African feminists, go deep into theory and solid organising, and only then build outwards—rather than deflect energies right at the start.

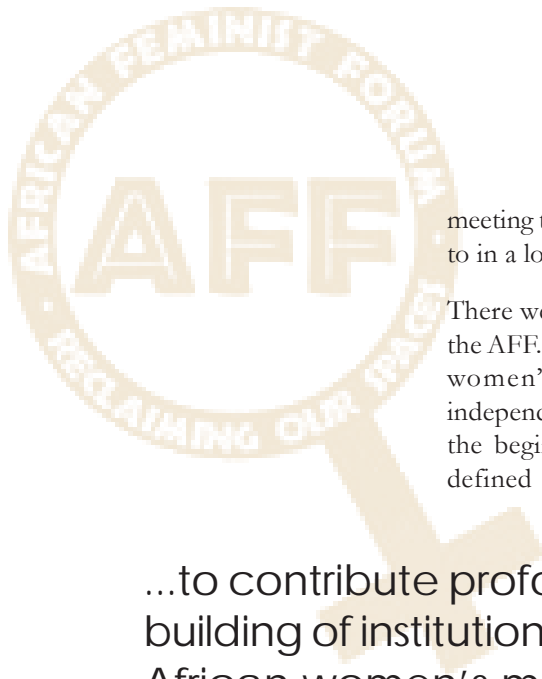
The AFF itself was constructed in a creative and participatory way. Four overarching themes agreed upon by the coordinating group were tackled over a four-day period through plenaries and workshops. Equally important, artistic presentations, mock call-in shows, mock debates were facilitated as well as inter-generational lunch-time table discussions. Throughout the AFF, participants were urged to make use of the self-care spaces offering services as diverse as massage and sexuality workshops, and to shop at the craft and fabric market that had been convened on-site. Participants also had to participate in an African dance aerobics session to fundraise for costs. With programme coordination by Ayesha Imam, programme facilitation by Theo Sowa and the amazing design and logistical work of the AWDF’s staff, the AFF was—by far—the most enjoyable, inspiring and tension-free

*African feminists and gender rights advocates at the opening of the 2007 World Social Forum, Nairobi, Kenya.*



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meeting that many participants had been to in a long, long time.

There were several key outcomes from the AFF. First, a timeline of the African women's movement from pre-independence to the present. Second, the beginnings of a database of self-defined African feminists. Third, the

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summary of discussions pending the production of the full report. Finally, the adoption of a Charter of Principles for African Feminists—dealing with issues of ethics, both personal and institutional (please see below).

A website has been constructed on which most materials can be found: [www.africafeministforum.org](http://www.africafeministforum.org). But it is worth saying more about the purpose of the Charter. The aim really is to provide a set of principles by which self-defined African feminists signing onto the Charter can be held accountable—both personally as well as in relation to

the institutions they work in. The principles cover some of the most contentious issues of the African women's movement today—coming down clearly and unequivocally in favour, for example, of choice and the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The hope is to help foster confidence in addressing such issues personally and, as importantly, institutionally. For the principles also cover some of the hardest internal concerns of the African women's movement today—ethics in governance, financial, and human resource management and so on from an African feminist perspective. The aim is to contribute profoundly to the building of institutions within the African women's movement that live up to the promise of African feminism both internally and externally.

The plan is to hold another AFF in two or three years, with the AWDF hosting it for one more time. In the meantime, it is hoped that the materials generated will filter back into the African women's movement to inform our day-to-day work. ■

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