

Leadership and Renewal: Cite, Site and Sight in Women's Movements

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ABSTRACT *Benedette Muthien calls for an examination of leadership and renewal in the women's movement/s, arguing that the capacity of the women's movement to aspire and inspire is increasingly being lost. She warns that the women's movement is strong on the outside but weak on the inside, particularly for those who aspire to be involved and or have only just entered the movement.*

KEYWORDS *heteropatriarchal; future; inter-movement dialogue; violence against women; feminist spirituality*

Leadership and renewal

The AWID Forum gave us the occasion to look again at what is happening in the women's, movements with all its diversities. One key question was how the women's movement can maintain leadership and historic momentum, while still recruiting and building on the capacity of vibrant younger future leaders. Relevant lessons from other movements that grapple with diversities and regeneration capacity, such as the South African liberation movement, as well as international LGBTQI movements, have important lessons for the women's movements. In exploring the assertions (CITE), locations (SITE) and images (sight) that have informed and inspired the women's movement, one session¹ at the AWID Forum aimed to lay bare the inconsistencies and discrepancies between what the women's movement espouses and how these are produced and achieved within its own ranks. The women's movement is vociferously fighting for equalities – when it is addressing itself to a public from which it seeks visibility, legitimacy and resource viability. The case appears to be very different when looked at within the movement itself. There appears to be no need to cite equality, even though the women's movement is a site filled with inequalities. This situation, however, is overshadowed by the sight/images of strong, articulate and determined women.

Taking stock for the future

Seduced by the politics of visibility and organizational viability, the women's movement has increasingly pushed into the background the simmering demand of its members to partake within it the equalities the women's movement is championing. This is because the capacity of the women's movement to aspire and inspire is increasingly being lost

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to sections of the public (otherwise cited as heteropatriarchal), which is imagined as the most crucial site of the women's movement. As a result, many potential members are discouraged while existing members are compelled to fend for themselves, if not leave the movement. We could argue that the women's movement is strong on the outside, weak on the inside – particularly for those who aspire to be involved and or have only just entered the movement.

The future of the women's movement depends not only on its achievements but also on its failures to foster and maintain a space that is politically and personally rewarding to its members. It is to this sort of future that the panel addressed itself. Through a combination of visual and textual, as well as verbal inputs, the panel shared a historical journey that charted the internal discrepancies and inconsistencies of the women's movement and how they could be re-directed towards a path that is significantly more enabling, for its diversity of members. This poses important questions on how to strengthen the women's movement, in particular, how to nurture inspired and strongly committed future leaders. The women's movement knows more or less how to change the 'social/public patriarchs'. It has to do the same from within its own ranks.

Confronting imperialisms

A key topic was on the intersections of oppressions that challenge African women specifically, and women of colour in the diaspora more generally. In particular, lessons from the Black Consciousness movements of for example Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko highlight the fact that Patriarchy will only ultimately be overcome with a universal gender consciousness and unity among and between diverse women, across all 'isms' and geographies. This unity is only possible if power and privilege is deconstructed and owned by a united women's movement, supported by male and other allies (e.g. intersexed and transgendered peoples).

The rationale for this stems from experiences in the anti-apartheid movements, where people of colour united against the prevailing colonial imperatives to 'divide and rule'. So too the (extra)or-

inary extent of gender-based violences (GBVs), as evinced by two recent international studies (Amnesty International and the WHO), highlights that GBV is as critical to the maintenance of patriarchy, as, for example racial classification and white supremacy was to apartheid.

While liberal feminisms across continents play a critical role in, for example, legal reform it is precisely the prevailing politics of cooptation that hamper the mainstream feminist movements of the global North and elsewhere, like South Africa (e.g., skewed focus on employment benefits and gender representation in institutions of power and privilege, while scores of women in the global South die daily from easily preventable conditions). Colonialism and apartheid effected similar cooptive measures to 'divide and rule', legacies that still remain in regions like central Africa (e.g. artificial construction of Hutu and Tutsi).

This internalized oppression among and between people of colour is echoed among women generally, and feminists in particular. As people of colour, and Africans especially, have to move beyond victimhood and claim agency and power for themselves, women too have to transcend heteronormativities and the prevailing imperatives to reproduce patriarchal values and the patriarchal system, of which the equally (mal)adaptive capitalism has been a critical part for the past few centuries.

Violence and oppression brutalizes everyone, from victims/survivors to perpetrators to witnesses. All people benefit from transforming societies into equitable peaceful spaces, as even 'freeriders' (e.g. the millions of black South Africans who were not part of the anti-apartheid struggles) have benefited from the end of apartheid.

Personal is political

Questions were raised about donor imperatives that drive grassroots programmes (including gender and/or HIV/AIDS mainstreaming), and the question of whether activists should draw salaries and run the danger of being the drive to survive economically and/or professionally. Is there a need for gender revolution, given centuries of bru-

tal heteropatriarchal violences? How can we increase multi-sectoral collaborations between civil society, governments and donor agencies? There is a high degree of interdependence in personal and political healing-transformation-growth, especially given the high rate of rape, and the inevitability of having a significant number of women in any particular group recovering from rape trauma syndrome. This may in part contribute to some of the fractious conflicts in the women's movements locally and internationally.

The discussion reflected Peggy Antrobus writing on 'personal transformation' as rooted in agency:

Feminist praxis is a process that starts with the individual (i.e. building inner strength/empowerment, consciousness-raising/conscientization) and moves the individual through the 'community' into global public space (by caucusing, coalition building, campaigns) – a combination of counter-cultural and political approaches. [...] The kind of personal change that I envisage is one that would challenge leadership to recognize shortcomings and contradictions within oneself, to be consistent, ethical and honest about one's own limitations while experiencing one's own inner power. Above all, this kind of personal transformation would prevent us from thinking ourselves superior to others and trying to control or dominate others, but would rather help us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions. [...] We need the spiritual to create a feminist movement that offers pleasure to women: sexual pleasure, bodily pleasure, mental pleasure, pleasure of the soul, and also pleasure in work and in activism. We do not need a feminist movement that kills us with work but a movement that dances, laughs, and delights in the

creation of choreographics against globalization (2004: 172–175).

Feminist spirituality

The relevance of feminist spirituality (not the same as patriarchal religion) in personal and political movements remains contentious in women's movements. Similarly the issue of beyond-binaried sexualities, sometimes erroneously labelled as bisexuality. The late Audre Lorde remains a source of inspiration for many of those who feel themselves marginal to any given mainstream:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians [or non-heteronormative], who are black, who are older, know that survival is not an academic skill. [original emphasis]. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish...

...In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower. [emphasis added]. (Lorde, 1983)

We need to take heart, aim to define and empower, to engage with courage and move beyond the mainstream as we dance toward gender revolution...

Notes

- 1 The panelists were Bernedette Muthien (South Africa), Lorna Israel (Philippines), and Beng hui Tan (Malaysia), all scholar-activists in their late thirties. Approximately forty women across a wide age range and from different geographic locations participated. Many of the issues discussed here were raised in the paper I presented. If you would like a copy of the complete paper please feel free to contact me (see contacts in the Who's Who section of this issue of Development).

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