

## In Conversation: Masculinities and Gender-Based Violence

*Godwin Murunga*, of the University of Kenyatta, talks about his research – African feminisms and ideas on masculinities and violence – with Jane Bennett

**Jane Bennett:** Godwin, thank you very much for having this conversation. In the past decade or so, a lot of work has been initiated in African contexts around the importance of taking masculinities seriously as part and parcel of activist and theoretical feminist work. So, may we jump straight in – what is the most interesting piece of work you’ve been doing lately?

**Godwin Murunga:** There are three main projects I am engaged with lately that touch very closely on masculinities. The first, a commissioned chapter on men and masculinities in Kenya, is an exploratory study of the state of research on men and their role in the struggles for gender equity in Kenya. When finished, the chapter will be reviewed for publication in a study to be edited by Elisabetta Ruspini, Jeff Hearn, Bob Pease and Keith Pringle titled *Globalizing Men: Transforming Men’s Practices in the New Millennium* that is to be published by Routledge. The second, a study of gender and “insecurities” in Africa, is a proposed joint project with Patricia Daley of School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford. We are still conceptualising the idea of this project. The third, also still at proposal formulation level, is a study of young women and political leadership in Kenya. This is being jointly formulated with Grace Mbugua of Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL) and Dr Regina Karega of the National Commission on Gender and Development of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development in Kenya. Though focusing on women, these two proposed projects have a masculinities component. Apart from these projects, I also convene the Gender Roundtable Series and publish the Gender Roundtable Bulletin at Kenyatta University with the support of the Regional Gender Programme of the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF). I started this Series in 2007 with the support of Wanjiku Wagoki of HBF and we convene periodically for dialogues, seminars and lectures on a theme of relevance to gender.

**JB:** All of those sound very interesting – the connection between masculinities and “insecurity” sounds especially provocative. Which one is the highlight for you, though, right now?

**GM:** The book chapter is perhaps the highlight of the three projects I have mentioned and let me briefly say more about it. Basically, this study begins with the argument that the emergence of active groups focusing their attention on men and masculinities in Kenya is very recent, dating perhaps only a decade ago. Their intervention in addressing challenges facing men and in changing attitudes towards women was therefore preceded and will most likely be framed by prior feminist struggles for gender equity. Since feminist struggles preceded men’s involvement in the struggles for equity, the chapter seeks to understand how the “men” and “masculinities” question has been framed by the feminist movements in Kenya and how this framing has impacted emerging groups and organizations whose objective is to address the men and masculinities question. At the core of the chapter is the attempt to reflect on why gender issues are predominantly treated as women’s issues and to initiate a re-reading of the male category in Kenya as a gendered category. Ultimately, the chapter makes the central argument that any investigation of changing masculinities can and should, conceptually and practically, contribute to promoting women’s rights and altering gender relations in society. In other words, I argue in this chapter that the project of “engendering” men does not, as is commonly assumed in sections of the feminist movement in Kenya, necessarily contradict the struggles for gender equity.

**JB:** Godwin, it’s still quite unusual to find men in our academic contexts so engaged with theorizing gender in Africa. What was your own trajectory into masculinity studies?

**GM:** My trajectory into masculinity studies has been shaped by three moments. The first was a review essay titled “African Women in the Academy and Beyond” that I published in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 2, 1, 2000. This was my first attempt to write on a gender theme. When I submitted the essay, I frankly was not sure it could pass the review process. At the time, I was a graduate student in the US. One reason I wrote the review was to engage myself more fruitfully away from a unit on historical linguistics that I was doing at the time. I did not find the unit interesting and I decided instead to write the review as a way of engaging myself. The essay provoked several conversations with Nkiru Nzegwu and Oyeronke Oyewumi, two scholars whose ideas have shaped a number of my

thoughts about gender because of the way they sociologically locate the notion in the African context.

After publishing the review essay online, Oyewumi requested to have it published as part of the *African Gender Studies: A Reader* that she edited. Subsequent to this publication, and this is the second moment, I was invited to attend the annual CODESRIA Gender Symposium in Cairo in 2007. Prior to this, I had been avidly reading around gender issues. The more I read, the more I got convinced that not only was this a valid and transformative area of study, but that more and more men needed to engage the field. Listening to or reading key contributors to the discussion in Africa, I was convinced that gender could not be treated as that area of research that one goes to as an afterthought and neither could it be pigeonholed into that “research thing” that scholars write on after they have already done all the other “important” stuff. It was clear to me reading Sylvia Tamale, Amina Mama or Zenebeworke Tadesse that gender was an integral aspect of our everyday lives. Indeed, everyday engagements are structured around or influenced by gender and its social construction.

Yet, and this was the third moment, there was the nagging question of what role men can play in the gendered struggles for equity and why they receive very little mention in mainstream gender studies. My own reflections on this led me to two general initiatives. The first involved avidly reading what African feminists say about the place of men in gender struggles and the second was a workshop I organized on behalf of Ford Foundation Regional Office in Nairobi in May 2008.

In starting my reading, I could not think of a stronger advocate for women empowerment than the Nigerian feminist and academic, Obioma Nnaemeka. In the article titled “Nego Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way” published in *Signs*, Volume 29, Issue 2, 2004, she refers to the African feminist struggles for equity as nego-feminism and defines it as “a feminism of negotiation” or as “no-ego feminism.” To her, this is a feminism that foregrounds “negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance.” She argues that African Feminism “challenges through negotiation and compromise.” In explaining the negotiation, Nnaemeka cites Filomena Chioma Steady to point to a very important feature of the cultural universe in which African feminists operate: the fact that their context makes it necessary that they

“view human life from a total, rather dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not the other, but part of the human

same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own."

Nnaemeka concludes with the statement: "African women's willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive."

This is a powerful conceptual argument that brings men back into the discussion of gender. One only finds such argument in scattered dots that are yet to be connected into a single coherent account of what role men ought to play in the struggles for gender equity. It is Willy Mutunga and Tade Akin Aina who gave me the opportunity to think through these issues. First, they supported me for a one month reading and reflections stay in the US where I had the chance to use the Northwestern University Library in October 2007. Then in May 2008, they asked me to co-ordinate a Convening on The Well-Being of Black Men and Masculinities in the United States and Africa. This convening was meant to be the beginning of a conversation among African colleagues and between them and colleagues in the US. This convening helped me shape my own thoughts about men and masculinities and how these relate to struggles for gender equity.

**JB:** So how would you put this all in a nutshell, if you were faced with a sceptical audience?

**GM:** I would like to offer these thoughts in very broad strokes.

First, the struggle against sexism and for gender equity was pioneered by women. Indeed, black/African women pioneered the struggle against multiple forms of marginalisation. Thus, women know what they want and how to achieve it. As such, the entry of men into the struggle is welcome but we must guard against the possibility of them (men) subverting the struggle by seeking to take leadership and dominate this struggle. In other words, the role of men in the struggle for gender equity must be subordinated to the leadership and agenda of African women. Second, we advance this struggle every time we chip something away from the dominant patriarchal system. We do that, first by studying and understanding patriarchy and secondly (to borrow from Sylvia Tamale's fine formulation published in the *Gender Roundtable Bulletin*) by convincing men to "unlearn their internalised superiority and discuss new ways of being men." Furthermore, the struggle for gender equity constantly faces the challenge of entryism. We need to confront this by also insisting that women avoid the pitfalls of being masculinised. In other words, the more

men we can convince to join the struggle for gender justice, the better since this will constitute a gain for the struggle.

Here, an analogy from the civil rights movement will do. Every one of those great civil rights leaders acknowledges how important it was to have white allies in their struggle. While some may have become “allies” so as to spy on the civil rights movement, there is no doubt that the more white people got convinced of the gains of civil rights, the easier it became to launch deeper into the struggle. In other words, feminists need more male allies. They cannot get these allies if they do not engage masculinities and get men to unlearn their internalised superiority. As Sylvia Tamale summarised it at the Ford Foundation convening, the study of men and masculinities is only useful if it helps advance the struggle for equity and gender justice.

**JB.** Thanks, Godwin. Now, you’ve said something about this already but in your own thinking, what are the most important debates in African-based masculinities studies?

**GM:** There are very many debates around masculinities that are going on. But the one basic debate that has been overridden by the “sophisticated” dominant theories and studies is what the role of men in gender and feminist studies ought to be? Second, there are vibrant debates around gay identities and lesbianism that impact on masculinities studies in Africa. Finally, there are interesting discussion around the issue of masculinities, conflicts and gender-based violence.

The first debate is barely given due attention in most African feminist spaces, and as a consequence, a number of feminists have been unable to get over the conceptual difficulty of having men as allies in the struggle. As I have suggested above, once we subordinate masculinities studies in Africa to the historical struggles and gains of feminists and ensure that the agenda remains firmly with women, then the conceptual difficulty become less intense. But, at least in East Africa, this debate has also touched on allocation of resources for research and activism in gender studies. Some women and feminist organizations have warned against support to men’s organizations that do gender sensitisation. They argue that this diverts resources and monies that would or should otherwise be allocated to women’s organisations. For them, this perpetuates the historic male dominance. This debate can benefit from a conceptual clarification of what place and role African-based masculinities can play in advancing the struggle and ensuring commitment to gender equality.

The debate around gay identities and lesbianism is also a debate on exclusion and discrimination. It poses a challenge that impacts men in myriad ways. When not properly framed, debates on exclusion and discrimination often locate men, homogenously, as a privileged group. The debate on gay and lesbianism offer interesting corrections to this generalisation. In many African countries, the debate suffers two main problems. One, it unnecessarily pegs the discussion on western terms without being thoughtfully comparative and two, it uncritically Mugabe-izes the discussion. The reality ultimately is that there is no amount of dictatorship that will eliminate from our midst people whose sexual orientation differs from heterosexuals.

Second, there are important sociological questions to be dealt with respect to the presence in our midst of gays and lesbians. We can hold onto the idea of a “pristine Africa” free of such “deviants,” but that does not deal with the historical and sociological fact that that “pristine Africa” is fast disappearing before our own eyes. Men and women, gays and lesbians, young and old, black or white, etcetera, are all facing serious challenges in making it to the next day; they are experiencing rising levels of poverty, unemployment, exploitation, exclusion and discriminations of one form or another. In a sense, the targeting of gays and lesbians in our society has become a useful diversionary tool in a society experiencing grinding dictatorships and the result has been that if it gays and lesbians today, it will be someone else tomorrow. Those who sanction and legitimise exclusion today will live to experience it the next time.

The discussion about masculinities, conflicts and gender-based violence is perhaps the most enthralling. It is also scattered and quite often, there is no understanding of what role flawed masculinities play in conflicts. Furthermore, there is normalisation of men’s suffering in war and conflicts. Every news item on conflict will regularly mention how women and children are suffering from war or conflict and how rape and sexual abuse have become weapons for waggging war. Often, these news items report facts of suffering among women and children and no one can fruitfully dispute the fact. However, in making these reports, these items also normalise the suffering of men and identify all men as perpetrators and all women as victims. One cannot dispute that most wars in Africa are disproportionately masculine or masculinised. But we are better off nuancing this discussion to effectively deal with the gender dynamics that inform the causes and execution of war. In other words, women do not simply appear at the end of a conflict, they are apart of the gendered

discussions and rituals that go into making, execution and ending of war. But how well do we really understand that dynamic?

The idea of flawed or hegemonic masculinity has been used to indicate that though all men enjoy the “patriarchal dividend” by the sheer fact of being men, these dividends do not accrue to all of them in the same manner and in equal measure. I wonder how much we can use this insight to develop a nuanced conceptual way of rethinking masculinities, conflicts and gender-based violence?

**JB:** I think this is a very useful insight on many levels. How do you respond to the challenge of ensuring that these debates actually help us engage political and economic challenges facing men and women, in different contexts?

**GM:** Let us take the case of the first debate above on the role of men and apply it to Kenya, for instance, around the Sexual Offences Act of 2006. In my interaction with colleagues involved in the discussion, one had a sense that some gender activists treat this as a women’s issue alone. What is worse is that most men also treat issues of gender-based violence and representation as women’s issues. At the very best, a good number of them would say they are concerned about rape and leave it at the level of being concerned. In my view, this way of thinking about acts of violence and rape is misplaced and inadequate. What if we frame the argument differently and say that every man who has a sister, a daughter, a wife, a mother or a grandmother has a stake in operationalising and ensuring the efficacy of the Sexual Offences Act or the effective representation of women in political parties, in the Political Parties Act of 2007.

This alters the dynamic completely. This is the way I think about the effective conceptualisation of the role of men in gender struggles. In getting more men to appreciate the value of an empowered woman, we effectively create a basis not only of changing attitudes but also of mobilising a wider constituency to address real political and economic challenges facing men and women. Wangari Maathai put it very well when she said:

“I think we can talk about the position of women in Africa and see how miserable it is, quite often we forget that these miserable women are married to miserable men. They are oppressed together, and it is only a small group of elite middle-class Africans who can say that they have made it.”<sup>1</sup>

**JB:** You hinted above at some possible tensions between some feminist thinking and new explorations on masculinities in African contexts. What is

your own relationship with feminist thinkers and activists like?

GM: I consider most feminist thinkers and activists mostly as mentors and teachers. Every time I read, listen to or dialogue with a good number of African feminists, I come away appreciating how much I do not yet know. Of course, not all of them fit into this categorisation as I have also met “feminists” whose thinking/practices undermine women’s struggles.

I have already dropped a few names of feminist thinkers/activists whose work has influenced my thinking but that list is by no means exhaustive. I know some of these feminist thinkers or have engaged them in conversations through email or by telephone. There are many others whom I have never met but whose writings impute a level of familiarity. Overall, I would say that I read those feminist thinker/activists whose work I consider useful to my intellectual and personal growth or those whose commitments come through as inspiring. I am, for instance, referring to the work of Zen Tadesse (whom I first met in a very *acrimonious* context during the 2002 CODESRIA General Assembly in Kampala but who has become a mentor), Amina Mama (whose notion of femocracy represents for me an important conceptual breakthrough that we have not effectively utilised), Sylvia Tamale (whose work on sexuality retains a very solid sociological appreciation of the unique experiences of communities in Uganda), Takiwaa Manuh, Obioma Nnaemeka, Ifi Amadiume (a pioneer with her work on *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*), 'Ronke Oyewumi (I found myself defending her work on the *Invention of Women* in a graduate class at Northwestern University from unfair attack), Marema Toure, Fatou Sow, Aminata Diaw (I cannot get enough of the works of these three since they write in French), Shahida El-Baz, Onnalena Selolwane, Pinkie Mekgwe (friends and colleagues I have worked with in CODESRIA and whose thinking illuminate some of my own ideas), Rudo Gaidzanwa, Florence Etta, N'Dri T. Assie-Lumumba, Joy Kwesiga and Josephine Ahikire (whose work on higher education brings important gender dimensions to the discussion) and Winnie Mitullah (whose versatility confounds). I cannot forget Jessie Kabwila Kapasula, a colleague from Malawi, whose activism and academic engagements gel naturally and whose forcefulness in defending Africa and women’s rights is often mistaken for an anti-male bias. But Jessie will not shy away from stating it as she sees it.

There are of course non-African feminist writers/activists whose work has been inspiring and is a must read. Zillah Eisenstein and Chandra Talpate Mohanty come to mind. Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” article

was superb. Not only has Zillah regularly sent me her latest essays but she also gave us permission to republish sections of her book in the *Gender Roundtable Bulletin*. Then there are male colleagues and authors whose work, contribution and friendship is a constant inspiration. They are, among others, Adebayo Olukoshi, Joe Oloka-Onyango, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and, of course, the much younger colleague from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jacques Tshibwabwa Kuditchini. By far, my greatest inspiration in Kenya has been Will Mutunga and Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya. These are people who combine intellectual engagement and activism and manage often to deliver their messages with a combination of humility and candour.

With respect to feminist activist/thinkers, I confess to being a little too selective. This is perhaps unfair but I am more inclined towards those whose activism is informed by research. I find Atsango Chesoni, former Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of Experts for Constitution Review in Kenya quite engaging and was glad to host her for a Gender Roundtable Series Session early this year. The former Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika (London and Uganda), Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, has been an inspiration in my thinking. She is humorously engaging and actually provoked me into a dialogue with Wandia Nyoya that appeared simultaneously at [www.zeleza.com](http://www.zeleza.com) and [www.pambazuka.org](http://www.pambazuka.org) and in the Kenya Human Rights Commission Newsletters *Mizizi ya Haki*, Issue no. 9 July 2009. And I should add that I have always found Wandia Njoya's writings extremely engaging and beneficial, even though I seemed a little too dismissive of the particular piece I critiqued.

Of course, like every family, there are those with whom I enjoy only a passing relationship or that I have never really been able to gain their intellectual confidence and comradeship. There are others who have been dismissive of whatever contribution some of us can make to gender studies. I recall just after the *African Gender Studies* reader I refer to above was published, I was invited to a meeting in Cairo. When I proudly pulled out a copy I had carried along, a number of colleagues at the meeting were impressed and sought to find out how to acquire a copy. But two colleagues who asked to browse the copy simply looked at the names on the content page and dismissed it as a volume whose contributors live outside the continent. Such encounters have necessarily shaped how I engage other feminist colleagues.

**JB:** Hmm, that raises a whole set of questions on its own. Last one, though, for now – in your own mind, what are the most powerful ways of challenging

the “inevitable” connections between masculinization and tolerance for violence?

**GM:** Perhaps, it is important first to emphasize that there is no natural or inevitable connection between masculinity and tolerance for violence. That connection is the product of socialisation, the inevitable consequence not simply of masculinisation but of flawed masculinity, to borrow Rev. Dr. Timothy Njoya’s formulation. It is important to distinguish between forms of masculinity because if we generalise, we also condemn those forms of positive manhood in society that are obviously integral to our reality and wellbeing. This, of course takes me back to the reference to Nnaemeka above when she asserts that “the male is not the other, but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes he human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself.”

Tolerance for violence is the consequence of flawed socialisation. And the process of socialisation is indeed a lifelong one which begins from early on as a child. I think one powerful intervention must focus on the family to empower parents to teach male and female children about the dangers of flawed masculinity. This is the kind of masculinity that assumes men are superior, that they are owners of property, providers and protectors. This masculinity teaches men to internalise their superiority and women to internalise their inferiority. It allocates household chores according to sex and sanctions the domestication of women. In other words, flawed masculinity teaches young girls to become “things” and young men to become “people.” Things are normally owned by people.

**JB:** Godwin, thanks for this conversation ... the way you’re laying out your ideas is full of energy and conviction. I’m delighted we’re going to be able to offer them space in *Feminist Africa* and hope this won’t be the last time we connect.

## Endnotes

1. Statement by Wangari Maathai cited in Tami Hultman, “I am Woman,” in *Africa News*, 36, June 8–June 21, p. 3 or cited in April Gordon, “Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in Kenya: “Burying Otieno” Revisited,” in *Signs*, vol. 20, no. 4, p. 883