

Editorial

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The turn of the century has seen African women's activism at both national and regional levels at last begin to bear fruit, in the form of a number of interesting developments on the continent's political landscape. In 2003, the African Union Secretariat under the leadership of the former Malian President, Oumar Konare, articulated an unequivocal commitment to gender parity; and the ensuing lobbying resulted in a policy ensuring that no less than 50% of the AU commissioners would be women. A few months after this, a Gender Working Group was convened to embark on strategic planning in collaboration with the gender unit at the Secretariat, and to prepare for the upcoming Heads of State Summit. A special session on gender was held during the Heads of State Summit, and this in turn resulted in a Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, which was signed by all the Heads of State on 8 July 2004.

These developments need to be recognised as the outcomes of some fairly intense activism by hundreds of African women working in various networks, organisations and lobby groups. More directly, it was this political force that mobilised for the preparatory meetings and discussions, initiated in Durban, South Africa, and then followed up by meetings in Dakar, Senegal and Maputo, Mozambique. These produced the Durban Declaration, the Dakar Strategy, and the Maputo Declaration respectively, all of which were designed to advance the agenda of gender mainstreaming. This process culminated in a fourth meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where women produced "The African Women's Contribution to the Declaration on Mainstreaming Gender in the Africa Union." The Heads of States' Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa incorporates many of the issues that were raised during this preparatory process.

Since the dawning of independence in the mid-twentieth century, Africa as a continent has produced many worthy declarations, some of which look radical and visionary beside today's reform packages. The fact is that there is little cause for triumph because the objectives – development, democracy, participatory development, economic growth and the like – have yet to be realised. With respect to gender, however, because this has been such neglected terrain, the African Union's stance is indeed exciting. However, one thing that Africans must have learnt by now is that the real challenges lie not in the making of declarations, nor even in their follow-up in constitutional and legislative provisions, or policies that are hardly worth the paper they are written on, but in the lived realities of women's and men's lives. That these have continued to be among the harshest and most inequitable in the world should give us pause.

Does the Heads of States' Solemn Declaration actually signify a change in the profoundly patriarchal mindset of the all-male club of African Presidents, with their sorry track records? Perhaps some of our Presidents do wish to seize the opportunity to assume a global lead by moving towards the goal of gender parity within the political arena, but the signs are not very promising. It is still early days, but so far only President Mbeki, also Chair of South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress, has followed up the Solemn Declaration by declaring that by the 2009 elections, the ANC will ensure full gender parity on all party lists. President Mbeki has already appointed 12 women out of a total of 27 cabinet positions, overriding the resistance of rank-and-file party men further down the political hierarchies (*Mail & Guardian*, 27 Aug 2004). For the time being, however, most nations remain far short of even the negotiated compromise of a 30% quota of women in politics to which they all committed when they signed the Beijing Platform a decade ago. Meanwhile, Africa has some of the lowest political representation rates for women in the world.

The question that remains is this: just what do these diverse levels of political representation

mean in terms of gender equality and justice in Africa's 54 nations? The gender dynamics pervading the political sphere are still inadequately understood, and have remained very much subject to existing structures and manipulations that constantly subvert commitments to gender equality, and complicate the pursuit of gender-just policies, in ways that are becoming increasingly apparent to observers, but which remain under-researched.

South Africa's comparatively high representation of women in the political arena for over a decade now, sits alongside the worst figures for gender-based violence in the world, and some of the most shocking manifestations of sexual abuse (often fatal) against women of all ages across the social spectrum. Not only are more rapes and gang rapes carried out in this democracy than in any other country not embroiled in civil or national conflict, but the victims are more likely to be grievously injured or killed in the process than anywhere else in the world. Worse still, support services and prevention strategies are severely under-resourced.

While it is clear that in broad terms, affirmative action is a prerequisite for getting women into politics, it is still proving controversial, even in those countries where it has already yielded significant results. Two of the countries under scrutiny in this issue – Uganda and South Africa – have adopted affirmative action in political representation, and in so doing have set themselves ahead of the rest of the continent. However, beyond this, the similarities end. The national political conditions surrounding the numerical increase in women's participation remain quite different, as two feature contributions to this edition of *Feminist Africa* demonstrate.

A key lesson of the post-Beijing period has been that numerical advances, while remaining an important minimal pre-condition for gender equality, are far from sufficient. Affirmative action strategies have so far been too easily appropriated and manipulated by male political actors, the majority of whom remain deeply resistant to gender equality. And nowhere has affirmative action led to parity.

Amanda Gouws' article on South Africa challenges the popular representation of South Africa as the one African nation that has surpassed all others in the legislative and policy arenas concerning gender equity. It critically explores the players and processes behind the legislative changes in order to assess their likely durability, and the prospects for the translation of these gains into real transformation of gender relations in South African society. The particular confluence of circumstances that enabled the standing Joint Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women (JCQLSW) to achieve more legislative advances than any other Parliamentary committee are reflected on in order to raise the question of how to sustain the momentum for transformation. Gouws further provides a detailed tracking of the legal and policy processes in the area of customary law with regard to marriage, highlighting the persisting hierarchies of inequality among women, and the implications of these for the efficacy of the legislative reform achieved by the concerted efforts of feminist activists, but with relatively little involvement by rural and poor South African women.

Josephine Ahikire's paper discusses Africa's second "model country", focusing on the electoral process in Uganda. She develops a critical analysis of the various gender dynamics and political sub-texts that have become apparent in the implementation of affirmative action in the last two presidential elections. Ahikire builds on Sylvia Tamale's landmark book on Ugandan women's experiences of parliamentary politics, *When Hens begin to Crow* (Tamale 1999), exploring the experience of the two presidential elections, in which two different affirmative action strategies were deployed. In the second election, the Electoral College system of the first election was replaced by the less effective institution of "special seats" for women at constituency level, with some problematic results. Her discussion suggests that affirmative action has limited effects, unless it is accompanied by a wider overhaul of political

systems exhibiting patriarchal cultures that remain largely unchallenged.

Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria, has consistently resisted women's demands for affirmative action, and has one of Africa's lowest representations of women in politics. To date there are still only three women (out of 109) in the Senate, accounting for a paltry 2,8% of the seats. Jibrin Ibrahim's article observes that Nigeria's military and civilian leaders alike have preferred to utilise women from their own homes – parading a succession of high-profile First Ladies as their contribution towards gender representation. This has seen the wives of male leaders gaining great visibility on the national political landscape in ways that have often been less than legitimate, as indexed by the rash of lawsuits mounted against these successive First Ladies. Ibrahim's essay documents the excesses of femocracy African-style, and raises the question of whether this can be seen to have advanced women's political participation, given the unfavourable context of military dictatorship and its civilian aftermath. His description of the negative experiences of women in the civilian elections suggests that there has been very little progress. Instead, women seeking election have been hampered by a national political culture dominated by money, corruption and the power wielded by local political barons and overlords. Amina Salihu's profile of one of Nigeria's few prominent female politicians, the Honourable Habiba Sabo Gabarin, gives us further insight into the complex routes that individual women politicians follow to gain power in the context of entrenched networks of finance and patronage.

The three feature articles invite some cautious preliminary comparisons between the three polities they examine. While the Nigerian scenario is distinguished by the lack of progress made during its political transition from military to civil government, the movement-based transitions effected in both Uganda and South Africa have resulted in substantially increased involvement by women in politics.

The women's movements have also been quite differently organised in the three contexts, most effectively so in South Africa, where the Women's National Coalition was able to significantly influence the constitutional process, as Gouws observes in her article. Nigeria's disparate women's movements have proved much less effective, achieving relatively few constitutional or policy gains. This particular transition process, however, offered far less room for women to intervene. Beyond lining up behind male contenders, they were largely excluded from the process. As a result, there was little room for negotiation concerning women's interests, and the male-dominated parties were all able to circumvent the demands previously raised by women's movements, despite the latter having been a vocal and articulate element within the wider pro-democracy movement.

In Uganda, women have benefited substantially from the National Resistance Movement's strategy of mobilising previously neglected constituencies, including women, in coming to and maintaining power, but this has had limited effect at national political level, where opportunities have remained largely bounded by the political exigencies of NRM tactics. Ahikire's discussion of the electoral process is supplemented by the revealing and intimate interview with Winnie Byanyima, the outspoken Ugandan Member of Parliament. This offers a level of experiential analysis that enriches our understanding of the devil in the detail – the micropolitics of what it means to be an MP who makes no apology for identifying with feminism. [1]

What general insights can be drawn from these studies, and what do they add to our knowledge of gender and politics in African contexts? It is clear that in most countries, women remain poorly represented. Where women are present in the political arena, their capacity for pursuing gender agendas remains severely constrained, in ways that reflect the inherent biases of political systems that have historically excluded women.

Women's political participation is also still resisted by male politicians all over Africa, although the extent to which this is overtly expressed now varies, becoming more constrained only where there is a strong countervailing discourse from the leadership. Once women do gain entry into political spaces, they face many further challenges when it comes to sustaining their careers as politicians, not to mention pursuing feminist agendas within political structures and systems that remain inherently antagonistic to substantive gender equality.

The challenges of transnational activism are alluded to in the standpoint pieces by feminist activists in Zimbabwe (Everjoice Win) and Botswana (Onalenna Selolwane), who respectively discuss the Zimbabwean crisis from within the country and from the perspective of its neighbours. While the *Feminist Africa* editorial team worked hard to include a contribution from South Africa, in the light of Everjoice's heartfelt challenge, we were unable to do so, and hope this will not be taken as a sign of inaction on the part of South African women. We would also have liked to include a discussion of the challenges of internationalism posed by the recent developments in Nigeria, where locally-based women's organisations found it necessary to object to international letter-writing campaigns against the stoning of Amina Lawal (a Nigerian woman condemned to death for allegedly committing adultery), even as South African women's organisations demonstrated in the streets of Cape Town and petitioned President Mbeki to prevail on President Obasanjo to "stop the stoning".

Marnia Lazreg's standpoint piece questions the international discourses that seem to at once invoke and displace gender, widening the gap between rhetoric and reality in ways that pose particular challenges to feminism. At the same time, she observes that contemporary challenges of global economic and political reforms have given rise to resurgent religious and ethnic manifestations of social conservatism. These respond to Western foreign policies in ways that she considers inimical to women's political agendas. She calls for renewed feminist mobilisations of women across continents and cultures. But is this call realistic, given the questions being raised within both international and African women's movements?

In order to pursue the challenges of African feminist activism in the face of contemporary global and local challenges, *Feminist Africa 4* will focus on Women's Mobilisations. We hope to explore the modes of organising that women are currently devising, and to illuminate the deeper and more profound meaning of politics generated by the experiences and strategies of feminist activists working and struggling in our uniquely challenging contexts.

The last five years of feminist scholarship offer profound analytical insights into African politics in general, yet mainstream scholars are still largely ignoring the dynamics of gender in the political arena. Horace Campbell's recent work is therefore to be welcomed for its rare attempt to place gender at the heart of his analysis of Zimbabwe. His book, *Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation*, is reviewed by Zimbabwean feminist Shereen Essof in this issue.

For now, *Feminist Africa 3* critically explores a continental landscape largely driven by the still heavily masculine imperatives of nation-statehood. Within this paradigm, Africa has accumulated four decades of post-colonial political experience, and three decades of gender equality activism. Contemporary feminist scholarship on African politics faces the task of interrogating an increasingly tricky landscape. On the one hand, this displays some of the world's most elaborate national machineries, and makes some of the grandest policy declarations, while on the other hand, it also includes many nations that have still not embarked on even the most rudimentary steps towards the political equality of women and men. As such, they cannot legitimately claim any level of democracy, even at the minimal level of political representation.

The African Union therefore faces some daunting challenges. It is to be hoped that Oumar Konare can live up to his own visionary statements and push forward on the gender equality agenda, despite the inherent limitations of the structure he heads. The recent appointment of as inspiring a feminist politician as the Honourable Winnie Byanyima to head the Gender Directorate in the AU Secretariat, may well carry us beyond the political tricks of the postcolonial experience, and herald a new era of transformation that might truly enhance the lives of ordinary women all over Africa.

Footnote

[1]See "Perils and Promises: Reflections on Living a Feminist Politics". Presentations by Pregs Govender (South Africa) and Winnie Byanyima (MP, Uganda). African Gender Institute Panel Discussion on International Women's Day, 8 March 2004.
<http://web.uct.ac.za/org/agi/events/events.htm>

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