

## Thematic Section

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# African Feminism: How should we change?

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**ABSTRACT** *Sylvia Tamale gives a critical, self-reflexive analysis of the African women's movement, with her proposals for the changes she would like to see. She asks that African feminists transform themselves and societies into a more equitable, democratic and tolerant one.*

**KEYWORDS** *Africa; professionalizing; fundamentalism; activism; transformation*

One should always be drunk.  
That's all there is to it; it's the only way.  
Not to feel the horrible burden of Time  
That breaks your back and bends you to the earth,  
You should be continually drunk.

Drunk with what?  
With passion, with anger, with outrage or with justice, as you please.  
But get drunk.

And if sometimes you should happen to awake,  
On the stairs of a palace, on the green grass of a ditch, in the dreary solitude of your own room,  
and find that your drunkenness is ebbing or has vanished,  
Ask the wind and the wave, ask star, bird, or clock, ask everything that flies, everything that  
moans, everything that flows, everything that sings, everything that speaks,  
Ask them the time; and the wind, the wave, the star, the bird and the clock will all reply:  
'It is Time to get drunk! If you are not to be the martyred slaves of Time, be perpetually drunk!  
With passion, with anger, with outrage or with justice, as you please.'

### Speaking the F word

This is a slightly modified version of the poem entitled, 'Be Drunk' by the 19th century French Poet, Charles Baudelaire. I believe that feminists and women's rights activists around the world need to be poetically drunk! The problem with the women's movements today, particularly those in Africa, is that most of its activists are either teetotal and thus totally sober or only slightly tipsy. We need to be absolutely giddy, elated, exhilarated and drunk on our cause, our objectives, our mission and our obligations.

We need to fan the flames of feminism.  
We need to change the way we 'do' feminism.

In the part of the world I come from, that is, Africa, most women's rights practitioners prefer to call themselves 'gender activists'. For various reasons, we avoid the F-word: Feminism. However, I personally steer clear of the term, 'gender activist'. This is because it lacks the 'political punch' that is central to feminism. In the African context, the term 'gender activist' has had the regrettable tendency to lead to apathetic reluctance, comfortable complacency, dangerous diplomacy and even impotence. Somehow, society has managed to remove the element of 'activism' from the so-called 'gender activists' on the continent. More and more, we see gravitation towards 'inactive activists'.

This article is a critical, self-reflexive analysis of the African women's movement, bringing it to bear with the changes I would like to see in its actors. The introspective analysis is meant to fan the fire under the belly of African women's movements. Hopefully, it will provide the much-needed zeal that will spark many of us into action to initiate the process of transforming ourselves and our societies into a more equitable, democratic and tolerant one. I genuinely believe that feminists can turn things around for the continent and the world at large.

### ***Why the urgency at this time?***

We are all aware of the widespread and multi-faceted backlash against women's rights worldwide. The gains that the global women's movement has achieved, especially in the last five decades, face a real danger of being lost.

It must be understood that a backlash against 'women's issues' is a backlash against democracy and progressive change. The issues for women are in fact issues that concern *all* world citizens. They are developmental issues. In Africa, when the backlash is placed against the backdrop of political monopoly, economic deprivation, poverty, violence, displacement, adjusting economies and globalization, the crisis multiplies tenfold. It will take a new revamped kind of feminism to resist and defeat this kind of backlash. A feminism with a capital 'F'.

### ***Identifying the challenges and weaknesses***

The challenges are many, but I focus here on three main ones.

#### ***Careerism***

Generally speaking, when the struggle for women's rights in Africa was spearheaded through community-based organizations and prior to the boom of non-governmental organizations, there was a genuine commitment to the cause. Women (and a few men) volunteered and sacrificed their time and resources with the fervor of a guerilla freedom fighter. However, because of the sheer size of the work that has to be done by feminists, the fact that most of us work double- or even triple-shifts (inside and outside the home), the fact that our work is under-resourced, we were forced to turn to the development industry. Today, the culture of donor-driven non-governmental organizations has overtaken the struggle and this, coupled with government's tight control of non-governmental organizations' work, has depoliticized the women's movement. Presently, many of us are in 'the business of women's rights' not as political activists but mainly to advance our personal interests. We sit and strategize not on how to genuinely transform society but on how our positions will benefit us financially. 'Careerism' has eaten so deeply into the African women's movement that many of us do not even practice what we preach as feminist principles.

#### ***Gap between theory and practice***

A closely related problem concerns the wide gap between feminist theory and praxis. Feminists in the African academy and the activist practitioners on the ground tend to operate in separate cocoons. Gender equality and women's rights rhetoric hardly spreads beyond the legal landscape. Yet theory leads to informed activism. Theory is about understanding the 'what?' the 'why?' and the 'how?' questions about women's oppression, about power. When feminist theory does not speak to gender activism and when the latter does not inform the former, the unfortunate result is a half-baked and truncated feminism. Under-theorized praxis is comparable to groping in the dark in

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search of a coffee bean. It leads to 'obscurantism', hindering clear vision, knowledge, progress and enlightenment. Social transformation can hardly be achieved under such conditions.

### *Extremism and fundamentalisms*

All forms of fundamentalisms – whether it is cultural fundamentalism (such as, the revival of virginity tests), or religious fundamentalism (such as, the crippling of women's sexual and reproductive rights), or economic fundamentalism (such as, the neo-liberal structural adjustment policies) – all pose a serious threat to the feminist agenda. We need to carefully analyze and understand the capitalist social structures that go hand in hand with the resurgence of all types of fundamentalisms and their totalizing discourses. They threaten to roll back our achievements and to silence us into total patriarchal submission.

### *How should we change?*

#### *Political engagement*

The first thing we must do is set aside our reluctance to engage with political structures, systems and institutions. Often, we openly declare our organizations to be 'non-political'. We do not want to be tarred with the brush of politics and we distance ourselves from formal politics as much as possible. However, how can we avoid politics when women's subordination and oppression is a political issue? How can we engage the powerful patriarchs in our countries without confronting politics? Obviously, women stand to lose a great deal from the entrenchment of any form of dictatorship. We must perceive gender equity as one of the major pillars of our democracy today. Gender equity would ripen global democracy to its truest sense. All women's organizations involved in the struggle for women's rights should, therefore, declare their political agenda.

#### *Theorize*

It is vital for us to theorize our work. I cannot over-emphasize the need for us to enhance our research capacities and vigorous engagement in producing home-grown feminist theory. We must

reconceptualize the important linkages between theory and practice in the women's movement. This is the only way of pursuing our goals with clarity and inspired action. For instance, today many of us have a clouded understanding of the significant linkages between sexuality and African women's oppression. We do not recognize the link between 'pleasure', 'choice', 'power' and women's oppression. Take the patriarchal discourses on HIV/AIDS spearheaded by the male-dominated AIDS Commissions in our countries. All their programmes singularly proclaim HIV as a disease, completely disregarding societal *dis-ease* with women's sexual freedom. If these commissions adopted a gender approach to AIDS, the pandemic would be almost wiped out by now. It is important for us to understand that our sexuality has a whole lot to do with women's oppression. We can see it in ideologies such as 'heteronormativity', 'marriagenormativity' and 'mothenormativity'. This means that attempts to liberate women must address the crucial issue of sexuality.

#### *Radicalism*

We should embrace radical strategies in our struggles. We must reject the arguments that Africa is not ready for radical feminism. What such arguments are saying in essence is that we are not ready for *transformation*. In fact, the majority of people who espouse the 'women-should-take-it-nice-and-slow' line are those that have never directly experienced gender discrimination. We heard similar arguments in the 19th century, made by slave owners who argued that slavery was a normal condition to everyday living. We also heard it from colonialists in the middle of the 20th century. And most recently, in the language of pro-apartheid defenders in South Africa. I want us to remember the numerous legendary figures such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Mahatma Gandhi who opposed British colonialism, and Nelson Mandela who battled apartheid were all once labeled "radicals" by their oppressors. I am sure that none of us learning about the struggles of these men today through history books thought for one minute that their demands were too radical. However, the oppressors did. We want African traditionalists to tell us when they think condi-

tions will be right for us to adopt a radical approach?

***Innovation***

Finally, in our struggle we must be brave enough to tread where others fear to go. Many times we are intimidated into avoiding controversial paths, our work is discredited and delegitimized by the dominant patriarchal forces, we are made to feel lonely, isolated, and unsupported like social outcasts. Hence it is important to form our own support mechanisms, to be there for each other, to keep the fire burning, to be perpetually drunk on

our objectives, not to lose track of our cause. We should not be ashamed to associate ourselves with stigmatizing terms such as 'militant' and 'radical' that are used to describe us, for it will only take radical and revolutionary actions to overthrow patriarchy. Patriarchy uses the age-old trick of divide and rule. Fundamentalists across the spectrum have connecting points that unite them against feminism. It is also important for us to make the connectivity across our differences and specificities. With our collective efforts, we can in fact achieve the seemingly impossible.

**Note**

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