

# **FEARING OUR SILENCE AND SILENCING OUR FEARS**

8<sup>th</sup> Convening of the Uganda Feminist  
Forum

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Opening Address by Nancy Kachingwe



Thank you for the opportunity to give the opening address of the 8<sup>th</sup> Uganda Feminist Forum. I'm honoured to be here and would like to congratulate you for having been so consistent in keeping these encounters alive since the first UFF in 2008. The fact that you have been around for this long in itself signals that the UFF will continue to be around for a while to come and of course will move from strength to strength.

When I was invited to put together this address, I asked for reports of the other Forums so that we should connect with previous themes. 10 years ago in 2009 was about "*Movement Building For Impact And Sustenance Of The Feminist Mission.*" Interestingly the report also relayed a session on public speaking where, it said:

*"There are several differences between poor and great speakers. Good speakers frequently exhibit powerful intonation, keep eye-contact and understand how to touch the audience's buttons. They are engaging, passionate, clear, concise and focus on the audience; while the poor speakers are nervous and focus on self."*

So from the very start, the UFF had set a very high bar for us beleaguered keynote speakers to match up to. I will do my best!

Fast forwarding to 2018, the last UFF talked about "*Detonating the Power of the Ugandan Feminist Movement*". The topic shows an energy and confidence over the journey travelled, but also a sense of the urgency of our feminist mission. And there have been many other UFF themes which together could be the basis of a feminist manifesto:

- UFF 1 - 'Releasing the Feminist Brakes.'
- UFF 2 - 'Movement Building for Impact and Sustenance of the Feminist Mission.'
- UFF 3 - 'Feminist Movements and our Organizations: Remaining Relevant'.
- UFF 4 - 'Whose Power, Whose Politics
- UFF 5 - 'Spreading our Wings'.
- UFF 6 - "Grounding Ourselves: Taking on the Giant.
- UFF 7 – Detonating the power of the Ugandan Feminist Movement
- And now here we are:
- UFF 8 - Fearing our silence and silencing our fears

I do hope that the designated UFF historians here will look at this journey and interpret the moments for all of these very inspiring themes. Movements aren't linear. We bounce back and forth between introspection and extrospection, but I'm not sure which of these two was the source of this year's theme? In discussing fear and silence are we looking inwards or outwards? We would probably all agree that it is about both.

According to the concept note, our theme is inspired by one of Audre Lorde's last essays, "*The Transformation of Language into Action.*" It's an essay that is as liberating as it is daunting. It is therapeutic but it is also scary... silence is a death sentence, but speaking however fearful that may be, sets us free. Somewhere in between silence, and fear and death lies the question of risk. How, when and why do we risk our sense of safety and comfort and speak out?

The derogatory term for people who are fearful is a coward, defined as "a [person](#) who is not [brave](#) and is too [eager](#) to [avoid danger, difficulty](#), or [pain](#)." These are of course not experiences any of us willingly seek out, but for women, danger, difficulty and pain are far from exceptional. Danger, difficult and pain is what millions of women in Africa and beyond are unnecessarily subjected to everyday. There's a fallacy that it is men that are out there bravely confronting life's perils, while women rest easy at home and feel safe under their protection. Danger, difficulty and pain is our lived experience, and in fact, we are taught that we must learn to endure these and persevere because that is how life is.

*In the words of Winnie Mandela, "There is no longer anything I can fear. There is nothing the government has not done to me. There isn't any pain I haven't known."*

Given this reality, our reflection on our fears and silences should not be about blaming or shaming ourselves or each other, but rather about a collective process of conscientisation and mutual empowerment to draw strength for the challenges ahead.

Our struggle is not just to overcome our fears, but to eradicate those things that make us fearful. ... women are fearful because we live under regimes of terror from the earliest age. Terrorised because of what we wear or don't wear, who we sleep with or what we say. It is not that men are braver than women, they simply enjoy world where they have less reason to be fearful. They are less policed. We have a right as women to be able to live our lives as we choose free from fear. So even if we individually manage to overcome fears, the fact remains that we should not have to do so at all. It is a tendency under neoliberalism to overlook the systemic causes of our negative experiences, and tell everyone that that these are personal problems for which we should seek therapy, meditate, do more self-care or consume the latest superfood on the market, all of course at a price! Of course all these things are good to do. But we also must reject an environment that attributes our fear, lack of self-esteem, or misery as owing to our individual psychoses in a world that is otherwise fine.

The same can be said of silence. Every trick in the book has been used to deny women women of their right to speak and be heard. This is not just in public life, but also in our homes, communities or workplaces. The problem isn't our silence, the problem is the vicious techniques and strategies used specifically to silence women's voices.

In the essay that inspired the title of this forum Audre Lorde says that (I'm paraphrasing slightly):

*"(f)or every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we **examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed**, bridging our differences. (...) The women who sustained me [through that period] were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, **and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence**. (...) we are all waging a war with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not – (we are not only casualties, we are also warriors).*

Let us think about silencing and fear as manifestations of types of **tyranny** against which we have to fight. Indeed, most of us became feminists as a revolt against being consumed by the tyranny of hetero-patriarchy. We have been successful in so many ways. But we also have seen what a formidable opponent we are facing, patriarchy somehow still keeps getting the upper hand.

What keeps patriarchy so strong? And how does it still manage keep women silent and fearful ?

Patriarchy succeeds because, along with capitalism, racism, homophobia, classism or ultra-nationalism, it is part of an intimately connected global system of power that maintains itself by being able to dominate and control all resources—land, water and nature, human beings and their labour, culture and belief systems, knowledge, information and technology, finance. In addition to controlling resources, this globalised system of power is also controls the processes of production & reproduction. Controlling women's reproductive labour—by which human life is given and sustained is key to perpetuating the current system of unequal economic, political, social, cultural, racial and sexual power. Gender oppression is indispensable to the processes of wealth extraction, production and accumulation and concentration.

We often think of gender—and in particular—reproduction as something that has little to do with the economy. What does gender have to do with the processes of manufacturing and trading goods and services? What do stock markets, interest rates, inflation or currencies have to do with gender? Well, everything, in dramatic but deliberately invisible ways. Economies are completely dependent on ecological and human reproduction, not the other way around. And yet, reproduction has been relegated to the realm of the household, marginal to public policy with the burden placed almost exclusively on women. I'm sure you have heard the expression "investing in women in smart economics." Well it is even smarter economics to offload the labour cost of reproducing human beings onto women while those that control the rest of the economy can reap the benefits. But to get women to submit to this flagrant act of mass exploitation, they have to be made afraid, they have to be silenced. Fear and silencing women are strategies for political and economic domination. Gender oppression is part and parcel of maintaining modern systems of power and accumulation of resources by being able to benefit from women's free labour for free, or by devaluing it much as possible.

Capitalism/neoliberal capitalism/neoliberalism has once again become the dominant system of wealth accumulation and concentration. Our textbooks tell us that capitalism is simply an (neutral) economic system where free markets are able to operate with minimal interference from the state. But neoliberal capitalism has become a system of government just like socialism or communism. It is as much a political and social system as it is an economic one. It is a system that privileges the control of resources and power by one group—those that have capital—over others. To paraphrase capitalism is the rule of capital, for capital and by capital.

The main motivation of capitalism isn't democracy, or freedom or human well-being, rather it is profit. Capitalism would therefore prefer labour to be free altogether, and that includes reproductive labour. One of the main reasons why we as feminists have to be interested in 'the economy' is not so much because we need to understand

economic theory, but because the capitalist political economy relies on gender oppression for its model of accumulation. Without the massive subsidy of women's reproductive labour, we would not have the extreme kinds of inequality that we are seeing today. Women are prevented from claiming their fair share of the wealth we create by excluding us from resource ownership and markets, by making us dependent, fearful and acquiescent and by loading us with the unfair burden of reproductive care.

Our colonial histories have given us the experience of how imperialist capitalism seized power through violent gendered subordination, militarised notions of masculinity, to justify exploitation, racism, or homophobia. Women's economic and social exclusion were central to the imperial capitalist project. For colonised women to be free, both hetero-patriarchy as well as colonisation had to be overthrown. And indeed, independence contributed to an important rebalancing in gender relations.

Sadly the post-independence project of gaining autonomy from transnational corporate domination stalled and is now being reversed. The language of self-reliance and self-determination which were foundational to liberation movements and post-independence politics have been replaced by the dogma of being (unconditionally) open for business to foreign capital once again. We are witnessing the accelerating neo-liberalisation of African states—where the obligations of the state have shifted away from its primary responsibility to attend to the welfare of its citizens towards ensuring the comfort and ease of capital by deregulating and liberalising. The neoliberal agenda has stalled the process of moving forward the programme to finally secure for women their full social and economic rights.

As global finance capital has become more powerful, its demands have become more rapacious. What corporations are demanding are not only cheap access to resources, or to pay as little tax as possible, or to be able to move money in and out of countries as they wish, they are also demanding that governments withdraw from their primary function—to finance and deliver the public goods and services that we all need to survive and thrive. Through privatisation (or PPPs in its new version) corporations are demanding that government hand over control of those services—health, education, water, energy, infrastructure—to the private sector to make even more profit—but this time is making profit out of basic human needs.

We should forget about the old investment model where companies came in to set up a factory or a mine and export raw materials or manufactured goods... now governments are told that to be business friendly must create opportunities for companies to make money from what they collect as taxes So much for the entrepreneurial state! So we lose twice over, not only do we lose collective access and control over public goods and services, the poor are being taxed more for the enrichment of those that already have plenty. The neoliberal state is simply a fixer for capital, there to hand out contracts to pay companies to do the job that it is supposed to do with the money its collects from us to do it. It is not about prevent companies from exploiting workers, but rather facilitating it. It is little wonder then that corruption is on the increase—something that the biggest backers of this policy framework—the IMF and World Bank choose conveniently to ignore and in fact are largely silent about.

Often our fears and silences are because we are bewildered and overwhelmed in a world that is globalised, where information moves fast and technology makes change even faster. Where there are so many problems to address and we have too few resources to address all of them. Where we run and run and barely have time to think, listen, assess, understand what is really going on, never mind being able to find a framework to address it all. We may be dispirited after having seen popular revolts against the existing power structure but nothing changes. But the silences that are induced by self doubt and bewilderment are, once again, a result of careful manipulation. Young people are encouraged to be social disruptors but heavens forbid that they disrupt the economic system: redistribution? how unrealistic! free sanitary pads? How utopian! Running water? Lets not get overambitious! And who are you to talk about the economy? Leave that to the experts! You can have votes, but you can't have toilet. And so forth... Neoliberal capitalism as a social, economic and political order has established itself as an all invasive force co-opting and commoditising everything—even feminism, and resistance and struggle. Corporations are the new black—our existence is validated by our ability to be useful for them, not the other way around. The project continues like a juggernaut and indeed our silence will not protect us.

There is no reason that we should not fear that in the next decades we will lose the freedoms and rights we have got back only a few decades ago. We already see the attempts to undo international human rights framework and to attach multilateralism as a form of international cooperation. When it comes to political participation, what point is there in wanting to be part of systems and institutions whose very purpose has become to serve the interests of the rich and powerful? Our rights (those that we have and those we are still fighting for) still depend on political systems and institutions to promote, protect and enforce them. And so we have to demand change.

I would like to offer that we are at a moment where, as African feminists we must work to define a feminist right to self-determination and a feminist right to development. It is when there are crises of the magnitude the world is facing that these rights are most at threat. A new world order is being fought for—on the one side there are those that wish to take away our freedoms and shred what progress there has been to keep their power. On the other side are those that want a future where all can thrive, fully enjoy the fruits of their labour, and live without the fear and silence of oppression.

*1. All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.*

*2. All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources ( ) based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.*

*3. The States Parties to the present Covenant, (...) shall promote the realization of the right of self-determination, and shall respect that right, in conformity with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations.*

Our feminist struggles today can draw inspiration once again from these 'old school' rights. Of course self determination is what we are about as feminists, but I believe a revival of this notion also gives us with a bridge between the past triumphs and the

future visions, connecting us with struggles for liberation from many decades ago to the new ones that confront us. We need to define what 21<sup>st</sup> century a feminist self determination over our bodies, our resources, our economies, our institutions and our political systems and our development models. Self determination also makes sense of how we support each other across our differences as individual women. The right to development gives us a platform to build solidarity around social justice, economic justice, climate justice and gender justice for all groups of women. Today's dysfunctional hyper corporatized global order badly needs an overhaul is taking us towards of total destruction. It needs to be challenged with big noises and big ideas and big visions. We have overthrown empire before, we can do it again.

Fearing our silences and silencing our fears is what feminism is about, just as we are about those themes that we covered in the past UFFs: questioning power and politics, understanding who and what we are as a movement, spreading our wings AND grounding ourselves, understanding our power within the political moment, and taking on giants. The best way to break silence is to make a lot of noise. Let us make the noise, be heard and fight for a better future.

Thank you.