



feminist dialogue series

#3

DECEMBER 2016

Bubble-gum feminism and the decolonialisation and decapitalisation of minds

Fungai Machirori

About ten years ago, while pursuing my undergraduate degree in journalism and media studies in Zimbabwe, our class took a compulsory course on gender and feminism. For most of the semester, we went through the works of feminist scholars and activists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, and Gloria Steinem. We learnt about the different waves of feminism within a context of a history very removed from our own, but which our studies universalized. And as a result – at least in my own mind – feminism had nothing to do with me beyond helping me pass a course to get closer to completion of my studies.

I carried on this way for the greater part of my early to mid-20s, working in civil society and identifying myself as a 'gender activist', conforming many of my emotions to agreed standards of what I'd like to think of as polite anger. It would be some years later, during a fellowship in feminist studies, that I would come to the deep realization that I still didn't know what feminism really was. For a long time, I had been resistant to what I then considered external 'labelling', with the following words from a 1994 interview with Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta resonating deeply with me; among other responses to the question of whether she considers herself a feminist, Emecheta states: "I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist, that is your

business..." (Mikell G. (2003): *African Feminism*)

I also mused over other works such as the poem 'Sisterhood' by Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, which narrates the conversation between a black maid and her white 'madam' – supposedly united in solidarity against patriarchy – which ends as follows:

"I'll looked up
from my chore
on the kitchen floor
where, new found sister
had ordered me to be
on knees

to scrub the floor clean
for the pittance she paid:
on knees
to scrub the floor clean
for sisterarchy."



My ambivalence about feminism centred around identifying myself within a politics that did not seem to have been defined with me in mind, a politics which – at best – confused me and – at worst – made me angry. Was this an externally oriented identity that I was being forced to assume, I asked myself? Was this just another form of neo-colonialism?

Admittedly, this was a journey that would take me some years; years in which I asked many questions and sought many answers, sometimes becoming more frustrated by their elusiveness. But this was where the work of coming to a politics and consciousness would happen, inspired by writings of the likes of Audre Lorde, Patricia McFadden, Filomina Steady, Ama Ata Aidoo, Everjoice Win, Bell Hooks and many other women of colour who compelled me to walk my personal feminist journey.

As with my awakening through finally reading literature from Africa in my late teens – after a lifetime of only consuming western texts and imaginaries of snow, Victorian lifestyle and English countryside – reading the works of these women situated me within a context in which I could finally identify and position myself.

Feminism is ‘cool’... or is it?

Today, feminism – at least in the west – is cool. It might even be considered funky. In Hollywood, calling oneself feminist seems increasingly like a badge as a marker of one’s progressiveness. Beyonce, one of the most profitable musicians of our time, samples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx talk-turned-hot-selling booklet ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ on her hit track ‘Flawless’. At the same time, however, the lyrics to the song include “Bow down bitches” and “I woke up like this” (referring to waking up flawless, which in this case looks like heteronormative feminine beauty – polished make up, bold lipstick and a trendy hairstyle). From Jennifer Lopez to Taylor Swift, it’s cool to be feminist these days. Never mind that one can hardly identify these stars’ political stances or critiques on important issues such as women’s bodily autonomy, patriarchy and capitalism. In fact, all too often, these stars play into – and perpetuate – the problematic issues that their feminism should be fighting against.

I’d like to posit, however, that the conversation in Africa – though very similar – centres on a different locus of power and capital. Where western consumerism is succeeding greatly in packaging and selling a brand of ‘bubble-gum feminism’ that stays sugar sweet for only a few minutes, we are seeing similarly short-term and catchy programmatic interventions around feminist activism. ‘He for She’, a campaign championed by celebrity Emma Watson through the UN, has grown in many countries, pronouncing a position for men in fighting towards gender equality, but all too often through uncritical public pledges that require little commitment to long-term transformative justice. Orange Day, another activity that has recently become popular, asks that observers wear orange each 25th of the month, as a means to raise awareness around violence against women. While an important indicator of solidarity, the practice is not always accompanied by critical engagement with violence and its multiple manifestations and sites.

Also, it is increasingly common practice for trainings and workshops involving women to quickly be labelled feminist gatherings even without overt articulation of a shared feminist politics by the funders, organisers and participants. I recall being at one such meeting last year where quite a few participants admitted that they were only willing to call themselves feminists for the duration of the meeting. To them, feminism was simply a gateway to access resources and opportunities. And could they really be blamed given that the workshop organisers themselves cared more for meeting numerical targets and indicators than building a feminist consciousness?

Just as there is appropriation of feminism within consumerist markets such as mainstream western media, entertainment and advertising, so too must we confront this reality locally, and in the way that civil society responds to it.

Feminism in Zimbabwe

Indeed, the journey to feminist consciousness and articulation in Zimbabwe is fraught with many challenges. Except in a





few transformative and alternative spaces, to define oneself as a feminist – with overt politics around issues that still drive wedges among many, such as abortion, LGBTQI rights and sex and sexuality – still remains heavily stigmatised and censored. This is after all, a context in which – just in 2014 – the Supreme Court made a landmark ruling to remunerate Mildred Mapingure, a rape survivor who suffered the inefficiencies and biases of the justice delivery system. Mapingure was raped in an attack by robbers in 2006 which led to an unwanted pregnancy. After a series of events which denied her her legal right to access an abortion – as per stipulations of the Termination of Pregnancy Act which allows for terminations in the event of rape – Mapingure carried the pregnancy to term. She sued the government for a total of US\$51 000 in damages and maintenance of her child. The Supreme Court granted a judgement making provisions to remunerate Mapingure’s damages, but not to support the child’s maintenance.

Over five years since its opening, the Adolescent and Adult Rape Clinic in Harare, the only such institution servicing a population of over a million, still struggles to meet its resource needs to deal with cases of rape and sexual violence. At the end of 2015, a crowd funding campaign raised US\$1 135 to pay out to the clinic’s severely under-resourced staff as Christmas bonuses, highlighting the great lack that such essential services are operating with.

And while I talk about feminism and its emergence in mainstream civil society, I would like hasten to add that it also operates within a context of social apathy where headlines such as the following get published, with little more feedback than a few tweets of protest:

- 14-year-old maid assaulted for snatching boss’s husband (*NewsDay, January 25 2016*)
- Girl (13) beds 3 sugar daddies, contracts HIV (*The Herald, September 26 2016*)



In addition, radical Pentecostalism continues to expand amid the failures of

the state to guarantee social protections for citizens, thereby exacerbating deeply patriarchal modes of relation. Late last year, a Zimbabwean pastor courted deep controversy when female congregants reportedly surged through his church to receive condoms he had anointed by prayer; the miracle is said to have begun when one woman who had been separated from her husband for two years brought her condoms to the pastor to pray over as a means to convince him (her husband) that they should practice safe sex until they knew their HIV statuses. The underlying idea within the concept of miracle condoms is that the power to negotiate safe sex – or refuse sex at all – does not actually inhere within the woman herself, but rather within the power a pastor (as God’s interceptor) transfers to the object of negotiation. In a 2015 study of 22 Zimbabwean Christian women who had been abused by their male intimate partners, 16 (almost 75% of the cohort) reported that they did not take advantage of any of the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act to report their abuse to authorities (*Chireshe, 2015*). The belief in the power of prayer to end the violence, the perception of evil spirits as the true perpetrators of the violence and the idea that such suffering was a necessary test of faith were some reasons offered by the women who did not report the abuse.

The work of decolonising and decapitalising minds is, therefore, work that we must understand as being extremely complex, confrontational and at the cost of much of our comfort. In order to articulate a dynamic political feminism, we must become increasingly comfortable with confronting the multiple oppressions and contradictions that mark our lives as Zimbabwean and African women. We must also remain mindful of the multiple reasons that many are reluctant to come to self-identification as feminists, regarding ‘gender activism’ as a more accurate articulation of their politics. As a result, we must not see feminist work as ever complete, as might be suggested by the budget lines we allocate for our work, the theories of change we devise or the log frames in which we project radical but ultimately unachievable targets in which we sacrifice the quality of our potential influence for the quantity of people we can reach. Unfortunately, patriarchy in



its many guises – as depoliticized funding, the man of God’s “touch of mercy” and a shockingly careless and nationalized response to issues that largely affect women – continues to morph and co-opt our silence. ◉

About the Author

Fungai Machirori is a researcher, media consultant, communications specialists and blogger (<https://fungaineni.net/>) from Zimbabwe. Her research areas of interest include the impact of new media on feminist organizations, and the intersections of feminist politics and funding.

The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform Forum Mulher and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

The Feminist Dialogue Series proudly counts on the artistic contribution of Ruth Bañón (art header) and the design of Sebastião Montalvão (Lateral Multimedia).

This series is brought to you by:

