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Feminism in Africa: Trends and Prospects
Report of the International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa

Despite the advancement of women`s rights witnessed in the past few decades, we are currently experiencing a regional and international context in which not only are women's human rights disputed, but the historical achievements of the women's movement are being undermined. The fragility of democratic institutions, a conservative backlash and an economic crisis exacerbate the precarious situation of women in Africa and worldwide and weaken the opportunities of feminist movements for self-expression in their struggle for human rights.

Against this background, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the World March of Women and the Mozambican Women's Forum (Forúm Mulher) organised in October 2016 an encounter that brought together activists, academics and representatives of feminist organisations across the continent in order to jointly analyse these new contexts, discuss the trends and coordinate the creation and/or strengthening of regional action platforms for joint actions. This document is intended to present the main findings of the debate.

1. Situation of the human rights of women in Africa

Some data about the situation of women in Africa compiled from the African Human Development Report 2016 (UNDP, 2016), with additional information from UNESCO (2010), are presented below.

Education

Progress can be seen in the access of women and girls to education. In primary education, for instance, gender parity has practically been achieved (while Central Africa is somewhat behind). Although these are positive trends, the average schooling period indicates that there are large gender gaps in different regions.

Mean years of schooling, 25 and older, by sex and sub-region, 2014
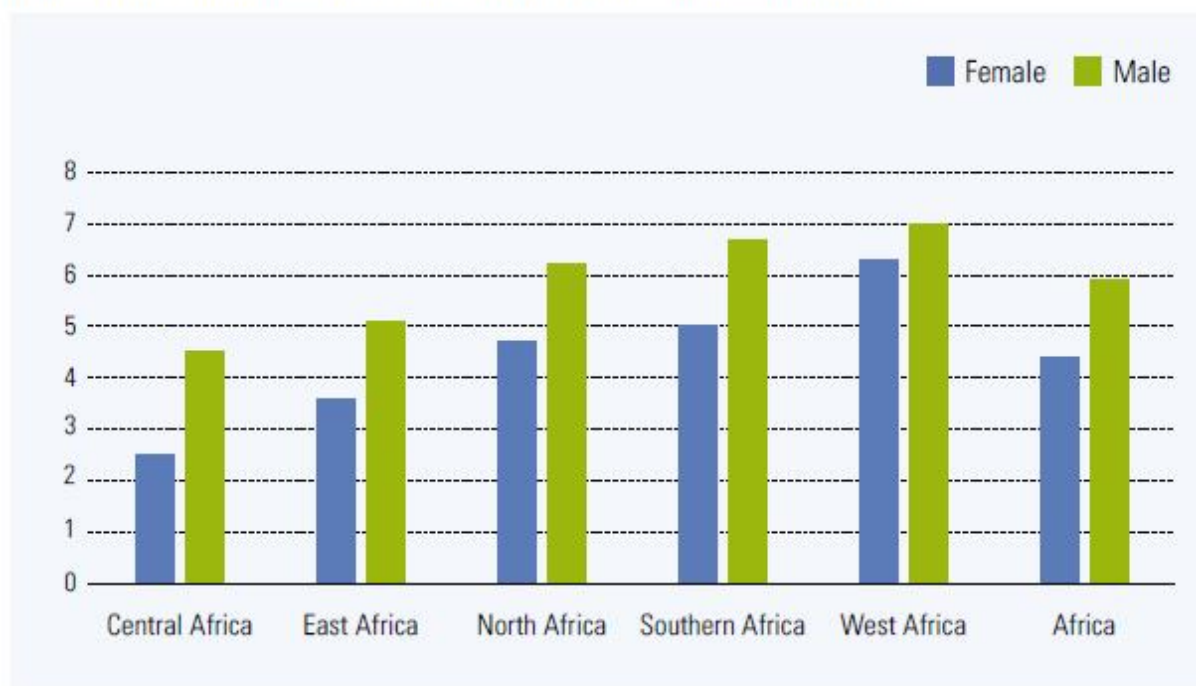
Source: UNDP 2015 Human Development Report.

The Central region, in last position, stands out, with women attending educational institutions on average for 2.5 years, compared to 4.4 years for men. Next is the Eastern region, with 3.6 years for women and 5.1 years for men. The Southern region shows 4.9 years for women and 6.6 years for men, while the Western region has schooling averages of 6.2 years for women and 6.9 years for men. In the Central region, access to education seems to be worst overall, especially for women. In addition, this region has the biggest difference in schooling years between men and women. This indicates that there are several obstacles preventing girls from benefitting from equal opportunities and that there is still significant gender inequality, mainly in secondary and tertiary education.

One problem associated with this situation is the social norms and beliefs that women and girls are taught, and the fact they are mainly responsible for housework and caring. On average, they spend twice as much time as men do on care, cooking, cleaning and collecting water and firewood. The amount of time spent on these tasks leads to reduced possibilities of education and employment, as well as physical and mental overload.

According to UNESCO data, the proportion of women in tertiary education on the continent is 4.8%, compared to 7.8% of men (UNESCO, 2010), despite the fact that there are increasing gender parity trends in all regions, as shown by the following figure. Although parity has almost been reached in the Eastern region, and the percentage of women has even exceeded that of men, it has not in the Southern region, and the Central region again stands out in last position, followed by the Western region.

Gender parity index in tertiary level enrolment by sub-region (ratio of girls to boys)
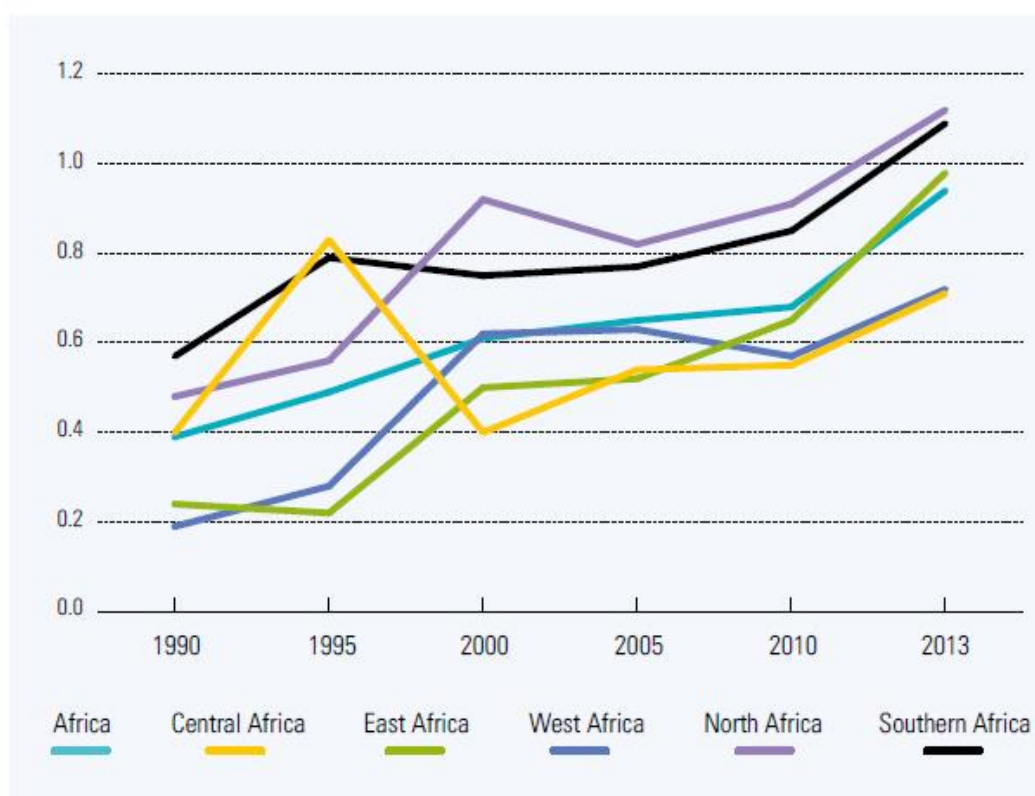
Source: Calculated by the AfHDR Team based on MDG Indicators data.

Employment and subsistence

Gender dynamics in education have been reflected in women's employability. While the number of employed women rose to 61%, these jobs were not necessarily well-paid or productive. The overall average of the unbalanced division of men's earnings compared to those of women is estimated at 30% (this means that for each $1 earned by a man, a woman gets 70 cents). This division is also influenced by other parameters, such as age, type of occupation, education, kinship and marital status. Women face inequalities in access to economic resources, participation in the workplace, opportunities for entrepreneurship and the use and benefit of natural resources and the environment. Even though it is increasing, the percentage of female business leaders on the continent ranges from 7% (Sudan) to 30% (Liberia).

Inter-relations with the gender division in tertiary education are assumed, especially in the areas of science and technology.

Given the inequalities in their level of education and professional skills, women are more likely to be found in vulnerable jobs with poor regulation and limited social protection. It is estimated that 66% of female employment in sub-Saharan Africa is in the non-agricultural informal sector.

Access, ownership and rights to land are important in the agrarian sector. These become significant economic tools not only in the cultivation of foods, but also in access to credit and other forms of productive means. However, data show that in many countries the percentage of women with agricultural possessions is low.

African women's share of agricultural holdings, 2000-2012
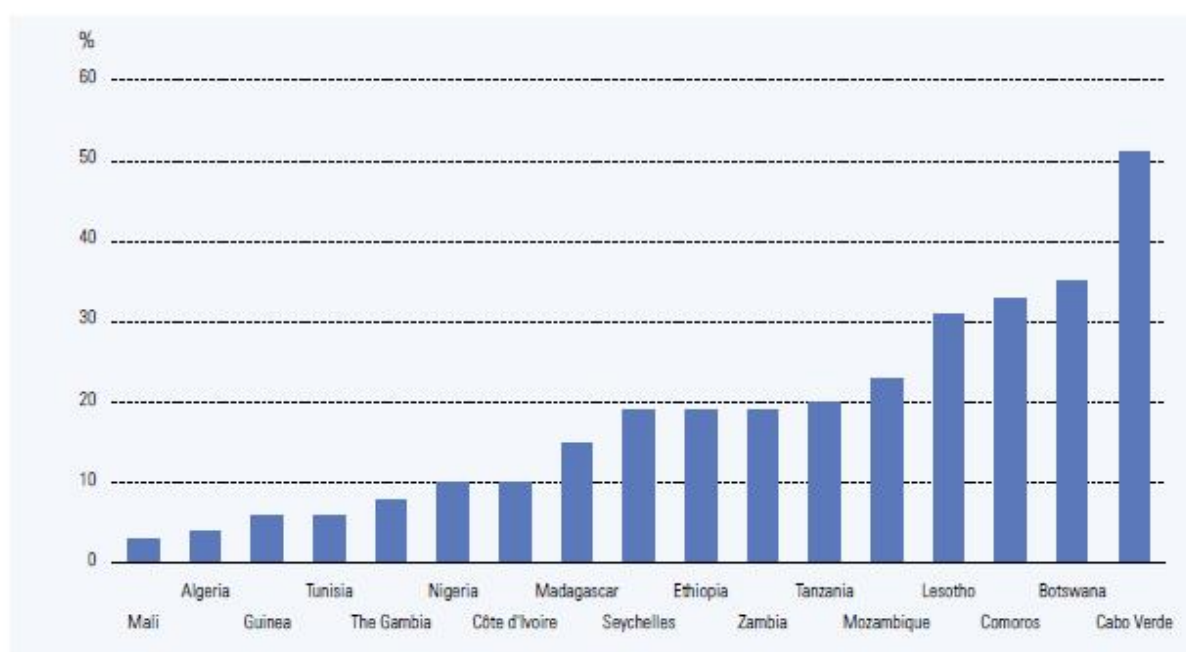
Source: Compiled by the AfHDR Team from FAO, 2016.

In general, only one third of women in poorer households have land for agricultural activities. Factors such as privatisation of land, degradation and the extension of multinational companies into the agricultural sector, amongst others, negatively affect the land ownership rights of women.
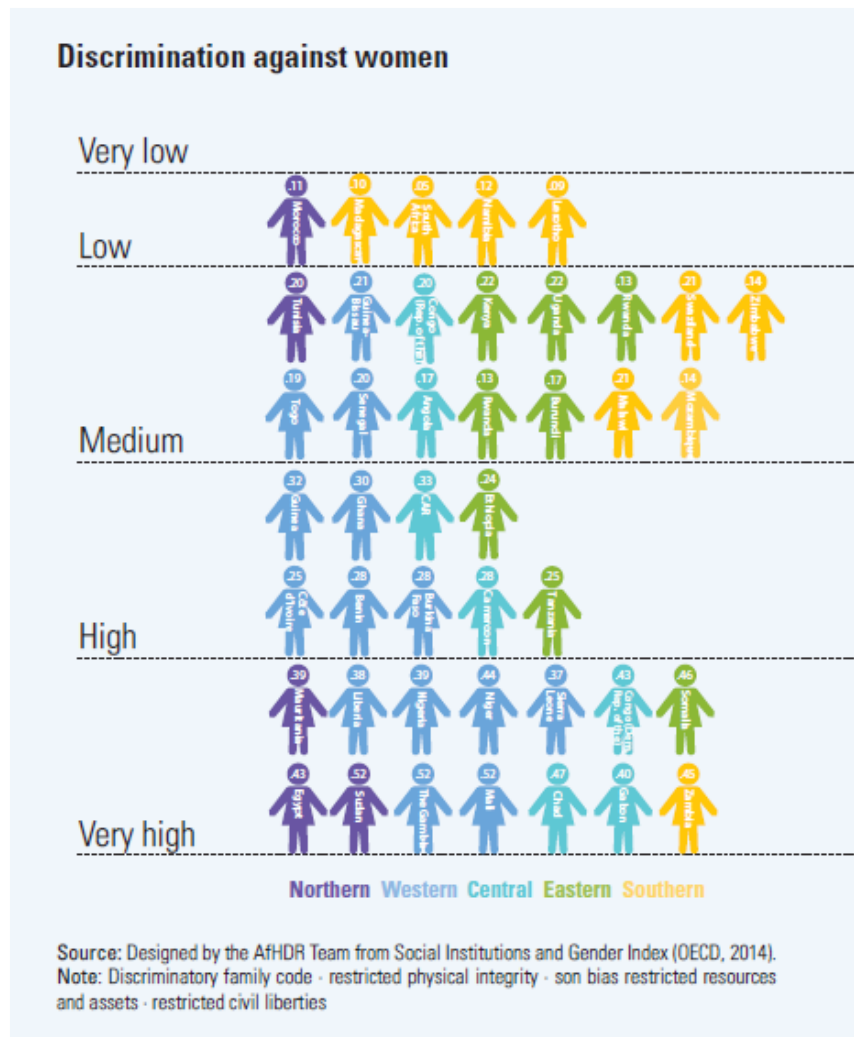
These gaps in income-generating possibilities and subsistence aspects result in lower human development among women than men. On average, African women reach only 87% of men's HDI (Human Development Index).

Political participation and legal framework

There has been significant progress in advancing women's participation in elected office and leadership positions in the public and private sector, civil service and trade unions. Sixteen countries surpassed the 30 per cent mark of representation in national parliaments established at the Beijing World Conference, mostly from Southern Africa and East Africa.

Despite the greater visibility of female leaders in parliaments, their presence has not translated into direct impacts on gender equality in the different countries. The following table shows the level of legal and social discrimination against women in different countries.

Discrimination against women

Very low

Low

Medium

High

Very high

.11 Morocco · .10 Madagascar · .05 South Africa · .12 Namibia · .09 Lesotho

.20 Tunisia · .21 Guinea-Bissau · .20 Congo (Rep. of the) · .22 Kenya · .22 Uganda · .13 Rwanda · .21 Swaziland · .14 Zimbabwe

.19 Togo · .20 Senegal · .17 Angola · .13 Rwanda · .17 Burundi · .21 Malawi · .14 Mozambique

.32 Guinea · .30 Ghana · .33 CAR · .24 Ethiopia

.25 Côte d'Ivoire · .28 Benin · .28 Burkina Faso · .28 Cameroon · .25 Tanzania

.39 Mauritania · .38 Liberia · .39 Nigeria · .44 Niger · .37 Sierra Leone · .43 Congo (Dem. Rep. of the) · .46 Somalia

.43 Egypt · .52 Sudan · .52 The Gambia · .52 Mali · .47 Chad · .40 Gabon · .45 Zambia

Northern · Western · Central · Eastern · Southern

Source: Designed by the AfHDR Team from Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD, 2014).
Note: Discriminatory family code · restricted physical integrity · son bias restricted resources and assets · restricted civil liberties

The high / very high rate of discriminatory standards in the Western and Central regions is striking.

Related reasons could be political structures that still proscribe the potential of female leaders from influencing national and local agendas and public policies. For example, a comparison of 12 countries on the continent shows that there is generally a low representation of women (between 5 and 23%) in higher positions in political parties. Another related problem may be the low level of fund allocation for the implementation of gender equality policies and measures.

African countries have adopted inter-national and regional legal frameworks on human and women's rights, but there is a significant gap between intent and action.

The challenge is often not to refine existing legal standards, but rather to ensure that these standards are fully defended, implemented and enforced. A challenge to the implementation of legal instruments is their coexistence with traditional law systems. Numerous social norms play significant and positive roles in building strong family and community ties, as well as in establishing trust and support conditions in times of crisis and deprivation. However, there are also negative institutions and social norms for gender equality advancement and the empowerment of women.

In connection with this, women face deprivation in their health and human rights due to factors such as early marriage, sexual and physical violence,

and maternal mortality. This makes women / girls of reproductive age (15 - 49 years) the highest risk group. For example, in countries such as Niger, Chad, DRC, South Sudan, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, the rate of early marriage varies between 50% and over 70%.

The rate of early marriage, as spread across the regions, is highest in Central Africa (41.5%), followed by West Africa (38.4%), East Africa (34.7%) and Southern Africa (9.9%), which appears to suffer less from this problem than the other regions.

A quarter of respondents to a survey by Afrobarometer in 2015 did not accept the concept of gender equality.

2. State and prospects of feminism in Africa

When referring to women's organisations or movements, whether classified as 'feminist' or not, is important to distinguish those which are co-opted by power. Various countries have experience of this type of organisation: one used by governments or political parties to speak on women's rights, but which in fact defend patriarchal institutions.

Since the 1980s, there have been advances in the situation of women and opportunities for action. Feminist-oriented women's organisations were established, despite the stigma that was (and still is!) attached to the word 'feminism' in many African countries. Many people are still reluctant to accept the feminist designation because of this stigma.

Feminist movements

There have been advances to the feminist movement and to women's rights throughout the world, enshrined in international and regional conventions and treaties, as well as in most national laws. The consensuses reached on gender violence, sexual and reproductive rights, and civil, social and political rights are equally relevant, but they coexist with the patriarchal system's hostile practices pertaining to women's human rights, with emphasis on sexual rights.

On the other hand, there is no belief that there is a 'feminist movement' in Africa, either at regional or sub-regional level, but, rather, that feminist women's groups are pursuing diverse agendas, albeit with some themes in common. Networks of organisations typically emerge around thematic areas, such as gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive rights. However, sensitive issues such as abortion may not achieve consensus, and can be divisive.

Different feminisms have emerged in specific places and are built in local terms. There are characteristics common to these currents, such as the analysis of oppression mechanisms, the need to adopt their own agenda and the demand for equality from the community. Cooperation exists, but in an isolated and non-systematic way, not enough to allow a sustainable exchange of experiences.

It is difficult to get a consensual definition of feminism, as there is no single approach to the concept and action, and women's experiences and pathways are too differentiated. Therefore, the purpose cannot be that all activists conform to a single vision or school of feminism, as both geography and decolonisation processes affect identities in different ways: hence the diversity of women's identity, shaped by diverse principles, cultures, traditions and religions, translating into the multiplicity of demands and

forcing the contemplation of these variables in the analysis of the situation of women.[1]

The coexistence of different currents of feminism is not an obstacle, insofar as it takes into account: the guarantee of the defence of women's freedom of choice and the negation of institutions that limit human rights; and the acknowledgement that feminist activism is always political and implies a clear position against social injustices,[2] and that solidarity must be nurtured as a value, and a principle to guide actions.

Another topic of discussion concerned feminist theories, the relationship between academia and activism, and the need for an education that empowers women. In relation to feminism, the need for a re-discussion of concepts to contemplate African feminism was mentioned, although there are reservations about this position, which is usually associated with criticism of academic feminists. However, the production of knowledge to inform the work of activism was said to be important.[3]

Forms of organisation and work

The dynamics of feminist movements are mostly national-based, with the possibility of partnerships and alliances around common topics, although the situation is entirely one of fragmentation of the various feminist groups. It is considered important to unite the different forms of struggle to strengthen the work. Regional and international cooperation takes place on a timely basis, but has not yet integrated work practices.

Most organisations rely on outside funds, which may entail alienating their agendas to the interests and priorities set by international agencies and cooperation sectors. This is a matter of concern to feminist movements as, in extreme cases, we find examples of organisations that are dissociated from national and regional realities, working to imposed agendas that do not promote the interests of women. The performance of women's organisations, as already mentioned, is often guided by their supporting role in national projects, aimed at filling the gaps created by structural adjustment programmes in our societies. They assume the responsibilities pertaining to

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[1] For Landaluze and Espel (2014-2015), "Intersectionality argues that different oppressions are intertwined in womanhood - class, race, gender and sexuality, amongst others - which cannot be examined as independent variables. Each of them is inherently interconnected with the others - is constituted by and constituent of the others. All authors agree on the relevance of intersectional analysis, within the milestone of African feminisms. However, there are substantial differences on which variables to prioritise".

[2] According to McFadden, "African women still do not recognisze that we are a political movement. We still behave like ladies at a tea party, and we are often shocked when men are brutal and violent towards us. We need to understand the true nature of politics so that we can change it" (1997).

[3] In this regard, A. Mama (2013) affirms: "As women we are in no position to deprive ourselves of the intellectual tools that can assist us in pursuit of gender justice. The arena of the intellect has been used to supress us. We cannot afford to ignore the importance of intellectual work, especially in the 21st century, when knowledge and information define power more than ever before. (...) I don't believe that this goal of knowledge, of working in the university, is a non-African or non-feminist symbol. On the contrary, they are areas that we must incorporate into our concerns; transform them into spaces that serve our collective interests, instead of allowing them to continue perpetrating theoretical and practical violence against women".

the state, without reflecting whether this is their own agenda or an imposed one (McFadden, 1997). Thus, departing from the economic dependence that conditions the agenda is a priority.

One aspect that deserved consensus among the participants was the need for innovation in the forms of work organisation and in the use of new information technologies to deal with hostility towards the demands of feminism and the growing hate speech in the media and social networks, exacerbated by the anonymity these provide. Examples of new technologies to be used are Twitter, Whatsapp and blogs.

Social networks and media are opportunities to be explored in various dimensions. Firstly, they may be used to react to and argue against misogynist and conservative views, causing alternative voices to be heard in a medium so far seldom used by feminists. Secondly, they may be important channels for reporting violations of women's human rights, for example by disseminating data on violence against women or premature marriages. This information is not usually provided by official bodies, but may have an impact on the public. Finally, like the bloggers who participated in the meeting, social networks can be used to challenge women's subordinate position and to defend their rights.

It is equally important for the women's movement to invest in the media, a still predominantly male environment, which plays a key role in perpetuating patriarchy. Women's prejudiced images or the conservative messages that are conveyed in the media cannot be fought if their presence is not made known in the same media, to produce images and alternative messages.[4] It is important not only to work with journalists, but also to take ownership directly.

The pressing need to form alliances at various moments of struggle with specific groups, such as unions, was reaffirmed, opening space to intervene in other areas. An example of this was the World March of Women, which has a partnership with La Via Campesina (International Peasant Movement), among others.

The setting up of men's organisations that fight for alternatives in the construction of identities and for equality signifies an advance in the defence of rights and opportunities for the establishment of broader alliances. Therefore, a sensitive point was the argument on the participation of men in the feminist movement. On the one hand, it is argued that men are allies that should be included, whilst on the other, the need to have spaces exclusively for women is maintained, to guarantee autonomy and because, strategically, this may represent a setback for the women's movement.[5]

Although the repression of LGBT organisations (potential partners) has been mentioned, the repression suffered by these movements has not been sufficiently valued, which is not without consequences for women's movements.

New and old feminist stakeholders

In recent years, young people have joined feminism, which brings new dynamism,

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emphasis on certain demands, but also some tension. This issue was considered vital for the growth and empowerment of feminist movements.

On the one hand, the integration of young feminists has emphasised the struggle for rights pertaining to sexuality, bringing in a perspective that considers their specific needs and demands. On the other, this new generation, more familiar with the new information technologies, will initiate other forms of communication and struggle, bringing new vigour to social networks and feminist movements.

It was considered important to empower young people, to provide them with opportunities for intervention and to support them in developing their capacities.

However, the integration of feminists from younger generations is not a frictionless process, but one that involves manifest tensions with older generations in the movements and, sometimes, lack of solidarity. The challenge remains: how to integrate young women so that there is no discontinuity in the struggle, how to ensure their empowerment, and how to open a continuous and profound dialogue between the generations of women.

The feminist agenda in women's movements

Despite the disparities between the various regions, the agendas of feminist organisations have certain main items in common, as shown below.

Gender violence - This is an endemic problem and, although in some countries there are specific laws to frame this crime legally, in most cases they are not enforced and there are high rates of impunity. This includes both domestic violence and sexual violence against women in areas of military conflict.

Sexual and Reproductive Rights - Possibly the most contested type of rights and considered as non-legitimate, due to interference from culture, tradition and religion (Christian and Muslim religious fundamentalisms). Abortion is undoubtedly the most controversial issue, but reproductive planning, bodily integrity and the right to decide on one's body were also mentioned as being part of the agenda.

Women's access to justice – This remains unsatisfactory, and the way the various forms of violence are dealt with reveals prejudice by justice system staff.

Conflicts with Muslim Laws - A problem mainly posed by the organisations of the West African countries with greater Islamic influence.

Women's situation in areas of exploitation of natural resources - Extraction and mining (including forestry exploitation, fishing and agriculture) have been characterised by what may be termed 'neo-extraction', where the logic of profit and its maximisation, and mining, as an activity linked to neo-colonial capitalism that profoundly impacts women and nature, are stressed. The multiple harmful effects of these processes on women's health have not yet been fully mapped.

Political successes

The great breakthrough is unanimously recognised as the fact that feminism can now be assumed without much conse-quence, although the stigmas that condemn and isolate women who recognise themselves as such remain. The emergence of feminist organisations,

however challenged and confronted, has forced debate and questioning on women's human rights, and has shown that women, by conquering the right to choose, can freely decide what they want to be.

Major challenges of the movements

The first challenge of feminism in Africa is *ownership of the gender concept*. After more than two decades, gender has become the language of the United Nations and of the powers, at the risk of losing its subversive character. From a concept designed to deconstruct and question the oppression of women, it has become a source of breaking the identification by silencing women. Most African governments have institutionalised 'gender policies', which have largely been used to rebuild and reinvent patriarchy. It is therefore crucial to recover the concept of gender and keep a critical eye on gender and development policies.

The second challenge is to continue and deepen the *struggle against conservative elites who adopt, through culture (or tradition and religion), the violation of women's rights*, for example, genital mutilation, domestic violence or early marriages. As regards culture, it was pointed out that although working with culture should be considered as an opportunity, there are aspects that cannot be avoided, namely the assumptions that perpetuate and reproduce inequality. It is important to oppose the defence of a culture that violates rights, particularly women's human rights. Culture cannot be above human rights. Harmful cultural practices

that discriminate against women should be denounced. There are radical aspects that must be eliminated. On the other hand, culture is often a weapon used whenever one wants to oppress women and deny them rights. This constant tension between culture and women's human rights ends up being imposed in the political struggle.[6]

The third challenge concerns the *'depoliticisation' of some women's organisations* in response to strong repressive measures against civil society. Indeed, in some countries, realising the potential for dissent, governments seek to infiltrate the organisations in order to control them and direct them to supporting agendas.

The fourth challenge is to encourage more feminists to participate in the political sphere, to engage in the *process of political demand and partisan struggle*. In fact, feminists, especially younger women, show a lack of motivation and desire for the political field, either because the stakeholders and political parties have no attractive proposals, or because of fear, or because they live a feminism restricted to the field of women's human rights. The involvement of women in political life is very important to influence policies and advocate for parity in decisions, the struggle for quotas in parliaments and partnerships to be made for political agendas. It is necessary to deepen the present quota system that is manipulated by the party apparatuses which manage to place, in government authorities, women who are loyal to the party and not to an agenda that respects the interests

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[6] As C. Pereira points out, "The modes in which 'custom', 'tradition' and/or 'culture' have been used specifically against women, have been documented under the rubric of harmful traditional practices. However, the linkage

between such practices and women's experiences of citizenship is not often made. More work is needed on the construction of customary laws and their role in the practice of violence".

and needs of the feminine population, and who are later subject to party discipline that, in parliament, controls the votes of the benches. The question is: how do women use their power in the areas they can conquer? The way the present quota system works masks, in fact, the patriarchal nature of power.

Similarly, how can the State be more involved in the establishment of policies that respect women's citizenship rights, and the monitoring of already approved policies?

A fifth challenge is to ***reinvent strategies*** that, in the context of infringement of rights, put an end to victimisation, which is a trap, and ***to build intervention modalities that help redefine feminist solidarity.***

The following is a synopsis of the challenges presented by region.

WEST AFRICA

- Fighting the accusations of witchcraft against women
- Motivating women to participate in the political arena, so they can occupy key places
- Overcoming the dispersion of feminist organisations, strengthening the bonds of solidarity and coordinating feminist theory with activism
- Fighting taboos as a method of defence of sexual and reproductive rights
- Fighting religious fanaticism
- Creating safe areas for women's intervention
- Commit the government to women's rights, reversing the current lack of political will
- Seeking alternatives and new forms of resistance in the face of hostility against the affirmation of women's rights

EAST AFRICA

- Breaking the silence and giving more visibility to women's opinions
- Eliminating the gap between generations of activists, creating channels of cooperation
- Building a regional cooperation network
- Ensuring resources at the level of grassroots organisations
- Countering the negative cultural impact on women's rights, challenging sexism and fighting the rape culture
- Building capacity to counter-attack hate attacks in social media (FB, Twitter, ...)
- Eliminating discriminatory inheritance laws and ensuring equal access to land, natural resources and the labour market
- Ensuring that women's movements are clear about who the oppressor is and promoting mutual support and solidarity

CHALLENGES

CENTRAL AFRICA

- Reinforcing the dialogue between generations of feminists, engaging and giving space to the younger generation, and intensifying the debate on the meaning of being a feminist
- Deepening the discussion on the elitist character of feminists and women's organisations, which have few grassroots links
- Finding alternatives to dependency on donor agendas and establishing their own agenda
- Counteracting the culture of silence, making women's voices heard and building the capacity to deal with gender-based violence at discourse level
- Designing innovative strategies in the fight for women's rights

SOUTHERN AFRICA

- Fighting racism
- Encouraging the building of pluralist and cohesive feminist movements, involving women from various levels of society
- Strengthening work at grassroots level
- Fighting against the exclusion of LGBT movements
- Fighting against the exclusion and discrimination of women in prostitution
- Strengthening people's education
- Including access to land and exploitation of natural resources on the agendas of organisations

Regional and international cooperation and networks

Following the previous discussions, participants recommend that alternatives to attacks on women's rights be found by strengthening and exchanging experiences among feminist movements and organisations. This cooperation should have both regional and international scope. The idea is to encourage the formation of an African feminist movement at regional and continental level that surpasses differences and opens to all areas.

The establishment of opportunities such as those provided by this conference is recommended to continue the debates and ensure greater openness of feminist movements to the diversity of experiences and demands.

Conclusion

There are two connections that can foster the development of feminist movements: 1) the creation of an *autonomous space for feminist studies* - knowledge production for feminist activity; and 2) the *formation of organic links between*

feminism and activism, to establish a mutual relationship of development; and to study different categories of women and their interventions, and also what unites them: for example, the political agenda for sexuality, exploitation of the female body, and the best understanding of the various experiences.

At this stage, it is essential to form an African feminist movement by sub-region and at a continental level, which overcomes differences in an intersectional perspective and uses all spaces, not just comfort spaces. Investing in new information technologies may push the movement to be more responsive and comprehensive.

Alimata Abdul Karin of the World March of Women, in Ghana, summed up the tone of the discussion on the perspectives of feminism:

"We will establish alliances with people that defend the same cause, but not stop there. We will have to make the alliances work in terms of the relevant issues and spaces, using also the new technologies, which we have to make our own tools".

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