



# feminist dialogue series

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## The Social Inclusion of Women and Challenges for a Contemporary African Feminist Activism

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*Gender based inequality and exclusion of women have proven intractable on the continent despite the proliferation of national and international development initiatives for Africa in the last decades. When so much is done in the name of gender sensitive social inclusion and so little result is felt by the women on the ground, we must ask ourselves: what went wrong? What makes it so difficult to redistribute power and profit to women, who greatly contribute with their sweat and blood to keep the capitalist system running? And what are the challenges for a contemporary African feminist activism to change the picture?*

To better understand the current debate about gender equality, inclusion and the struggle for power, we have to take a step back and look at the current realities in the light of the recent history, which ended colonialism with the promise to create a new society. African nationalism was once an ideology of liberation from oppression, which voiced the resistance against colonial regimes. Today, the national discourse is often used for exactly the opposite: as a tool for oppression against critique and – referring to cultural and religious arguments – especially against rebellious women.

### Conservative backlashes and the complicated reframing of nationalism

We won't understand the snail pace of socio-economic and political change in our countries, if we don't consider the political environment of a massive conservative backlash, that we are dealing with as feminist activists. The environment that many of us work in is increasingly anti-women, anti-black, anti-LGBTI, anti-poor. Uncomfortable voices of protests, especially voices of women, that demand effective pro-poor policies and political inclusion, are silenced and disqualified with arguments of African moral and culture as well as the stigma of confronting the nationalist cause, that others (those in power) fought for.





We therefore cannot have an honest conversation about contemporary African feminist activism without analysing the radical dictatorial and authoritative nationalism in many African countries. Almost everywhere you turn, there is a political leadership desperately clinging to power and selling a dream wrapped around this falsified idea of grand nationalism. Another version of “making our countries great again”. On the same time neoliberalism – a foreign imported ideology – is back in the political discourse. “The poor are poor because they do not force themselves to be better”, becomes again a respectable political analysis in the media landscape, where political elites are not even trying to implement policies of inclusion and only a very little group on the top is profiting from growth. This model, that is not in the interest of the people, is then justified by “nationalism”. Everybody who speaks out against disqualifies as anti-African, anti-nation, enemy. If the critic turns out to be female, optionally as well as slut and menace to the moral and the reproduction of the nation.

### **A gentlemen agreement on social inclusion of women**

So why do we feel that despite a proliferation of national and international development initiatives for the social inclusion of women, there are not really substantial improvements? Violence against women, rape, female genital mutilation are basically in all government agendas and strategic plans. But they are still there, a screaming social injustice right in the face of women.

There are efforts to get female representation in parliaments and political institutions right. While there are improvements in numbers, female parliamentarians still have to battle against stigmatisations of being the “weaker sex”, of not being able to really lead with the important issues (economy, security, finance) because they might get pregnant and they have to look for their families in the evenings, so they can't really be in power positions. It is so natural, that men obviously are free of those responsibilities, so they become the perfect power holders. Political parties, the media, even schools fall into the same trap and perpetuate often morally and religiously underpinned arguments for keeping the social structures the way they are and

not the way they should be, as the horrifying debates about the relation of women's and even school girl's outfits and sexual assaults show in different African countries.

These observations raise the question, if the whole politically correct debate about the “social inclusion of women” in the end is not just one card in the gamble for foreign aid. Our governments, in turn, “allow” us some wiggle room, but just enough to be branded as “democratic, liberal and changing faces of the new Africa”. And the international donors pretend that they believe the story. A gentlemen agreement. But what would a real inclusion of women look like? An inclusion not in an economic, social and political system run for and by men, but inclusion into a society model, which allows the freedom of voice and the freedom of choice for women. As we are unfortunately quite far from such a model in our current context, the answer to this question has to depart from the emerging struggles to come closer to this utopia of a gender and socially just society.

### **Social inclusion and a contemporary feminist activism**

The challenge that we face as radical women engaged in social transformation is the necessity of crafting a “contemporary feminism”. What does it mean to be a feminist today? Feminism is and will always have the goal of dismantling patriarchy. And while the *how* might differ from generation or person, it is clear that the task that lies ahead is still a hard one.

Feminism by its very nature is confrontational, is transformative in its ambitions. Feminists fight institutionalised oppressions. They are confronting religions, cultures and traditions, which are defending the privileges of men. Understanding how patriarchy works and intersects with all the other systems of oppression, like racism, homophobia and social elitism is essential to understanding how to dismantle it.







And exactly therefore, we must look closer to the attempts to mainstream and disempower feminist revindications, like that of an inclusive society, where people and especially women can speak their mind and live their choices. Using those revindications halfhearted as political buzzwords without content is dangerous for the political cause. It pretends that distribution of power, access and privilege is in the end a win-win situation, where we all can get out happy and nobody has to be challenged. In fact, dismantling patriarchy and elitism entails that the privileged will lose part of their special position and it will hurt. So fighting the feminist struggle means – adapting the words of the British writer Laurie Penny –, we have to get away from a pseudo-feminism that soothes, that speaks of shoes and shopping and sugar-free snacks and does not talk about poor women, queer women, ugly women, transsexual women, sex workers, single parents, or anybody else who fails to fit the mold.

Coming back to our social inclusion, that means: we have to defend the full package and not just for a certain group of well succeeded women, but for all of us. And we have to get inconvenient. Women today are still being forced to negotiate their full humanity. We are being told that we must wait our time, that we must not be too radical at the risk of alienating the “allies”. And so we compromise, and we ask politely, and we wait – and wait – 2017 years later. And while the luke-warm gender policies are working towards the realization of our rights, we forget that we have an agency, that we are actually political subjects and not objects or problems, that are solved by badly implemented public policies. The challenge therefore for contemporary African feminist activists is to begin to theorize and imagine the idea of radical transformational change beyond the mere inclusion into an unjust social, political and economic system.

### **Revitalising the feminist struggle for social justice and inclusion**

Young feminists all across Africa have begun to organise using tools available to them, taking on the media and other institutions, refusing to be defined by society and using formerly conservative spaces to fight patriarchy. There are lessons to learn from these

small collectives and movements that have emerged out of the necessity to reject silence and tackle our oppression head on.

There are also many strong radical women who have walked this struggle before us, whose practices and experiences can help us as we continue to shape the alternative. Contemporary feminism has to emerge from the consciousness of the past and the thirst for innovation. It has to bring about knowledge production as well as new radical action.

We must be able to reinvent ourselves creatively and radically to be able to tackle the systems of oppression that change. We must be able to connect, organise and form alliances despite the continuously shrinking spaces, that allow for these conversations.

The answer to the question “how to lead with the political realities of our time?” can be different from person to person, woman to woman and movement to movement. Some might conquer existing structures, like political parties, to transform them. Others might opt to take the streets to protest. But while we define an alternate universe, we must be able to empathise and stand with all women. Our struggle must therefore be truly intersectional. The mundane task that lies ahead for all of us who have deliberately identified as feminists in this generation, is to pick up the baton of dismantling patriarchy and all that comes with it. And so, while we might be afraid, we remember, that our silence will not protect us (Audre Lord). The use of our fears, vulnerabilities and all our experiences into tools we can use for corrective strategies is a necessary and radical step that we must embrace.





## References for further reading:

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## About the Author

Patricia is a radical feminist from Uganda. She works as a human rights lawyer, currently serves on the FRIDA – Young feminist fund advisory committee and is a permanent writer for Africanfeminism.com. She has also written and published academic papers on the human rights situation in Uganda, gendered inequalities, among others. Patricia is interested in using her writing to inform, teach and perhaps even help spark the much needed revolution. She tweets at [@triciatwasiima](https://twitter.com/triciatwasiima)

## 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 Comunicações).

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