



Editorial Notes

Women's rights and gender equality in Africa

Wangui Kimari, Nduka Otiono, Toby Moorsom,
Blair Rutherford, and Daniel Tubb

This fourth issue of *Nokoko* explores the themes, challenges, and opportunities in women's rights and gender equality in Africa. The volume celebrates African women's activism and struggles for their rights and social space to contribute to the continent's development and democratization processes. Along with a supportive development community, women's activism has resulted in notable progress in gender-responsive policy formulation, legislative reforms, and program and project design. The activism has also led to greater participation in political and decision-making processes throughout the continent. Still, widespread poverty, conflicts and wars, environmental degradation, drought, food insecurity, sexual violence, human trafficking, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic continue to disproportionately hurt rural women and the urban poor. The global financial crisis has exacerbated these problems. Moreover, African women

themselves do not have a uniform outlook on gender relations, patriarchy, and ways to improve their situation. Although there has been a long-standing focus to “help women” by a wider-range of social forces in colonial and postcolonial Africa (e.g., missionaries, government officials, political parties, women’s groups, feminists, and international development agencies), such efforts sometimes cause grief and dislocation, rather than benefits for different groups of women.

This volume sets out to explore these issues, including the inevitable shifts in resource flows that impact women and their families, the implications for national economies and activities that promote women’s rights and gender equality, the plethora of African women’s organizations and networks responding to these emerging challenges. Clearly, we need more attention on the remarkable resilience and resourcefulness of African women in times of crises. There is an urgent need to further dissect many themes, including women’s enduring survival and coping strategies at community level; the technologies facilitating women’s organizing within and across national borders; the ways that national and sub-national mechanisms incorporate lessons from women’s own efforts into planning and budgeting processes; and the new techniques and tools women use to ensure sustainability of successful efforts and avoid reversals amidst emerging global and national level challenges. For evidently, women’s activism in Africa draws on histories in which women have played crucial roles in challenging colonialism and oppression. Women were crucial in the bus boycotts in Apartheid South Africa, in the miners’ strikes in Zambia, and their riot against British policies in Aba, Nigeria became known as the “women’s war.” Women played key roles in resistance movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Kenya’s Mau Mau rebellion. Remembering the roles different women played in these events that have defined nationalist narratives of the colonial period is important. It is indeed imperative to examine different women’s heroic and quotidian struggles today as a way of under-

standing, and perhaps strategizing over, their ability to exact more influence on Africa's complex political space.

Grace Adeniyi-Ogunyankin examines discourses of women in politics by drawing on newspaper articles and interviews in south-west Nigeria. The article offers a timely exploration of opinions of women in the contexts of male-dominated states and national legislators. With women's limited participation in Nigeria's national and state legislators—Nigeria has never had a female president nor a woman state governor—unsurprisingly, men predominate in most Nigerian institutions and women are under-represented at every level. The author highlights the derogatory perception of women in politics as "spare tires," "second fiddle," and "prostitutes." "Spare tires" because the women are seen as conditional replacements at moments of broken politics; "second fiddle" because women's participation is believed to depend on men's approval; and "prostitutes" because people see women as exploiting their femininity for their own political gains.

Historically, Adeniyi-Ogunyankin notes the legacies of British colonial administrations and policies of indirect rule helped to create contemporary male political domination. While there were previous women leaders, the British excluded women and imposed their Victorian ideas of gender on Nigerian society. British policies cast Nigerian women as invisible. They subdued women's voices through policies of indirect rule that favored native male administrators. British schools trained women as housewives, child bearers, and mothers. While women shared in Nigeria's liberation struggle, as with many anti-colonial struggles independence brought amnesia to the contribution of women. The Nigerian state's gendered formation casts women as "mothers, wives, and reproducers of culture." Citizenship legislation relegates women's participation in politics to depending on her husband or fathers status; this created a mechanism to remove a woman's political rights.

The women interviewed by Adeniyi-Ogunyankin and the newspaper articles she analyzes highlight the belief that politics is a man's domain in which women have no equal footing. Cultural and religious arguments limit women's political roles, and promote the view that women should only be mothers and wives. These culturally grounded arguments cast God as ordaining male political dominance. And, men resist women's participation because they are afraid that women would no longer be under their authority, and that they would threaten gender relations in the home.

Besides, a view of politics as a risky venture that women should avoid is promoted. More so against the backdrop that Nigerian politics has a gendered nature as masculine and violent, a "do-or-die" politics that relies on godfathers and political gatekeepers that make it hard for women, and raises worries of sexual violence, beatings, and kidnappings. This violent gendered male domain excludes women precisely because they opt "out of exercising force." The article thus promotes the view that critically understanding the negative views of women in politics should inform feminist political struggles aimed at creating transformative change.

In their contribution to the volume, Wonder Maguraushe and Treda Mukuhlani shift attention from Adeniyi-Ogunyankin focus on national-scale politics, to everyday gendered exclusions in the ceremonies that accompany marriages in different parts of rural Zimbabwe. Maguraushe and Mukuhlani discuss the Shona conception of marriage through traditional bride-welcoming ceremonies, or *kupururudzira muroora*. Drawing on what the authors call an African phenomenological hermeneutic feminist cultural perspective, they show the ways that Shona cultural practices socialize young women for marriage. Their methods draw on a multi-sited ethnography in six villages, five interviews with women who describe the songs meaning for Shona marriages in a context of male chauvinism and patriarchy, and recordings and discourse analysis of the songs themselves. Maguraushe and Mukuhlani describe traditional marriage

ceremonies, the circumstances surrounding them, and their meaning.

In the ceremony, the sisters and aunts of a prospective bride's husband sing late into the evening to teach a young bride to be subordinate to her new husband. The authors argue that the songs relegate brides to a subaltern position. In Shona culture, a young woman becomes not simply a disciplined wife to their husbands, but also wife to his wider patrilineage. In a culture where female promiscuity has severe consequences, and after different stages of courtship, an important part of marriage is the traditional bride-welcoming ceremony. These events involve music, singing, and dancing. The lyrics impart instructions to the new bride on how to behave properly with her husband, how to be submissive, and how to please him sexually. The authors argue that women teach women how to "properly" behave while married. The "lessons" include not denying their husbands sex, an idea that reifies masculine power and domination. The traditional bride-welcoming ceremony songs thus persuade a young bride that if she does not satisfy her husband, she risks the lonely life of a divorcee. The authors argue that while the performances are not static, and that the performances continually change, as people reinterpret and reimagine them, the songs' contents raise questions of gender equity. The songs themselves transmit forms of cultural knowledge: marriage expectations, norms, customs, mores, and values. The authors undertake a discourse analysis of the songs to show how the lyrics instruct a young bride to be. It is women—the sisters and grandmothers of the groom—who teach a bride to be fearful of marriage. It is women who teach brides to thank their husbands for sex. While grooms have their own preparations for a marriage initiation processes, the uncles and brothers of their bride do not teach the grooms how to subjugate themselves to their new wives. Yet, in the name of "submission", the songs encourage women to be subordinates. The song's lyrics portray a woman as a desperate person, as someone who seeks male respect. The authors ar-

gue that the songs prepare women for subservience in marriage. To round off their discourse, the authors raise questions about how to discourage the oppression of women through feminist teachings and how to compose songs that are life affirming for women. The authors conclude by calling for more work on factors that contribute to the denigration of married women in Shona culture.

Nduka Otiono offers penetrating insights into the life and work of Catherine Acholonu, an iconoclastic Nigerian woman who represents a point of departure from the stereotypes highlighted in the preceding articles. In his contribution, "Catherine Acholonu (1951- 2014): The Female Writer as a Goddess," Otiono combines various genres in a single piece—review essay, personal narrative, and an interview—to celebrate the prolific African intellectual, cultural and political activist whose groundbreaking book, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) has greatly influenced feminist discourse in Africa. Otiono's contribution includes critical analysis of Acholonu's rare poetry books, a tribute to her remarkable life, and the author's own words to shed light on her research and her efforts to go beyond arm-chair intellectual engagements to contest for a space in Nigeria's male-dominated and risky political terrain. Thus, the article bridges the private and public lives of the energetic author of about sixteen books, and demonstrates that African women can pursue their dreams in spite of the debilitating sexual politics that often threaten their aspirations in the public sphere.

Two shorter articles follow Otiono's contribution. The articles critically and movingly reflect on past struggles in their countries and their potential meanings for personal and wider projects. Stephanie Urdang reflects on past anti-apartheid struggles for her own biography and sense of self, as well as for current pushes for transformative change in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing from her career as a journalist, author of the important book on women and struggle in Mozambique *And Still They Dance: Women, War and the Struggle for Change in Mozambique* (1989), and advisor on gender and

development, Urdang examines how major anti-apartheid protests intersected with her life, and how memories of these events have become the sandpaper used by South Africans today to roughen up sanitized images and proclamations of the post-apartheid era. Urdang invokes the 1960 march in Cape Town by tens of thousands to end pass laws, the 1989 Peace March in Cape Town by equally large crowds demanding the end of state violence (including apartheid itself), and the 1956 women's march in Pretoria also demanding the end of pass laws, and situates them in her own life. She also uses these to underline how they helped to forge her critical understanding of the injustices and her own sense of attachment and belonging to the place and the struggles which define it. She notes how different South Africans work to ensure that these anti-apartheid events are mobilized for the ongoing social justice struggles sorely needed in South Africa, more than twenty years after the end of Apartheid. Urdang's quotation from the great Guinea Bissauan and Cape Verdean intellectual and revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral, cogently captures this sentiment: "When our revolution is over, that is when our struggle will really begin."

The Kenyan journalist, Wairimu Gitau, conducts a similar archeology of public memory in her discussion of the contested remembrance of colonial oppression and different struggles against it in Kenya. She weaves together reflections on a conference in 2011, "Mau Mau and Other Liberation Movements 50 Years after Independence," organized by Karatina University and the National Museums of Kenya in Karatina, Central Kenya. Her reflections cover the memories of, and responses to public displays of the struggle for independence in Kenya by Kenyans of different ages, and her own critical reflections to write a provocative piece on the public silences or selective memories of the past. Gitau brings together these scholarly arguments, personal memories, and reflexive responses to show the powerful potentials and potent dangers of public history. Interestingly, questions about the colonial period and the struggles

against British rule lead to questions about the early years of Independence and the current configuration of wealth and privilege for a few, and exclusion and impoverishment for many. Her short piece describes the shadows of the past which colours the present, and shows how greater discussion and public reflections on the anti-colonial struggles like the Mau Mau, with the important role played by different women and girls can lead to greater questioning and demand for social justice today.

The final piece is by Tanzanian gender and development specialist, Rose Shayo. Although this article is not explicitly focused on African women's struggles, the gendered implications of her topic are not lost on the reader. In this paper, Shayo reflects on international academic exchange programs, her experience as a Visiting Scholar at Carleton University's Institute of African Studies (2010 to 2011), and as an educator for northern exchange students at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She explores the establishment, financing, and design of exchange programs; the differences between short and long-term exchanges; the benefits to staff and students in both sending and receiving institutions; and the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges faced by these programs. Shayo draws on her experience as a Visiting Scholar at Carleton University, and from other exchanges between institutions with an emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. She is no uncritical cheerleader, and she notes a lack of data and calls for more research. She also addresses gender issues through her teaching on gender-based violence in North America, students' reflections and classroom research in Canada and Tanzania, and the gendered challenges to access international exchange. The article calls for greater student and staff participation in program design and implementation in Global Northern and Southern universities to ensure their success and sustainability.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *Nokoko* foregrounds the fact that despite the modest gains made by African women in the struggles for gender equity so much more still needs to be done. This

edition of the journal is coming at a time when Africa's terror gangs have begun deploying innocent girls as young as 9 years old as suicide bombers. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria notorious for such dastardly acts, that included the historic kidnap of about 276 schoolgirls from the dormitory, also comes to mind. Elsewhere in Kenya the recent "my dress my choice" protests to highlight and denounce the public stripping and assault of at least four women within two weeks, as well as the numerous others who suffer gendered violence in silence, also highlight the persistence and (re)emergence of the concomitant and contradictory manifestations and intersections of neoliberal political economies, hyper-masculinity and youth "crisis" within this period of women's rights gains. Lastly, at a time when woman activists had begun to celebrate the token representation of women at the highest levels of governance as presidents in a few African countries—Liberia and Malawi—the disturbing new turns that gender victimhood has taken calls for more vigorous engagement with the gender question in Africa.

We also want to warmly thank our editorial colleague, Laketch Dirasse, who came up with the theme of this issue and has helped to shape it.



Female stone figures taken at the University of Dar es Salaam Fine Arts Department, Photo: Wangui Kimari.