

Resist depoliticisation - “The revolution will not be NGO-ised”: four lessons from African feminist organising

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African feminist movements are diverse. But we can, and must, learn from decades of transformational organising on the continent.

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Participants at the Black Feminisms Forum in Brazil, 2016. Photo: None on Record.

As African feminists, we face multiple systems of oppression [1] including the effects of colonisation, neocolonisation, white supremacy, militarism, the globalisation of capitalism and neoliberalism. Yet our movements are more vibrant and radically political than ever before.

We've subverted the erasure of women and gender nonconforming people from historical records. We've influenced public perception and policy. We're grappling with the NGO-industrial complex and the depoliticisation of our movements. Recognition of the need to reconstruct solidarity across borders and generations is growing.

Our heterogenous social movements vary so much across regions [2], character, and impact that they almost resist categorisation. But there are crucial lessons we can - and must - learn from decades of transformational organising on the continent. Here are four:

1. Memorialise your champions, but remember your 'anonymous' leaders too

One of the functions of patriarchy is to erase women and gender nonconforming people from historical records. In light of this, creating and amplifying alternative archives becomes a radical act of resistance.

Spaces like the African Feminist Forum (AFF) [3] have created opportunities for feminists from across Africa and its diaspora to connect and learn from one another, including the giants on whose shoulders we stand. The AFF recently launched a video series called “Voice, Power, and Soul” [4], putting faces and voices to vibrant movements on the continent.

‘fierce feminist leadership is mobilising across the continent’

The AFF series includes reflections from prominent African feminists, as well as from others who are less widely-known outside of their activist circles. This is important because documenting notable people can risk erasing the collective power of lesser known figures.

There is now growing recognition of the role of students and youth activists, gender nonconforming people, artists, peasants and sex workers. From student-led protests in South Africa to feminist mobilisation against the ‘Kill the gays’ bill in Uganda, to resisting autocracy in Egypt, fierce feminist leadership is mobilising across the continent.



Participants at the Black Feminisms Forum, a global gathering of Afrodescendant artists and activists, in 2016 in Bahia, Brazil. Photo: None on Record.

2. The revolution will not be NGO-ised

The proliferation of NGOs and over-reliance on them as vehicles to carry forward feminist projects has in many places de-politicised what should be a transformative agenda. The political instrumentalisation and institutionalisation of movements through NGOs is subject to growing concern and critique [5].

An example is the focus on the (debatable) necessity of men’s participation in African feminist movements. This has shrunk resources for feminist movement building, and has compromised hard-won safe spaces, as women are pressured to include men in their organising.

Seeking transformative change, some African feminists are rejecting more traditional models and structures and are organising through informal and community-led collectives like Ikhtyar [6] and HOLAAfrica! [7]. The Internet has also become a huge tool to mobilise people and elevate voices in powerful new ways. If you don’t believe us, check out the #Afrifem hashtag on Twitter [8].

3. You can’t take the politics out of the struggle

From the 1990s, African feminists have taken movement claims from the streets to national decision-making bodies and beyond. They’ve negotiated with government representatives to commit to progressive conventions such as the “Maputo Protocol” on the rights of women [9], adopted by the African Union in 2003. Progressive campaigns have increased public and political attention to gender equality.

Now African feminists must grapple with state cooption of movement agendas and tools. Feminist scholar Awino Okech [10] argues that a depoliticised focus on “gender” in international development has failed the African feminist movement as it aims for inclusionary politics rather than radical transformative gains. Women and feminist leaders joining government, only to end up as muted voices against state aggression, seems to be a deliberate consequence of “gender mainstreaming”.

‘African feminists must grapple with state cooption of movement agendas and tools’

African feminists have begun to recentre and repoliticise gender and development to its radical roots - and build new foundations for solidarity by politicising African feminism, speaking to commonalities without denying differences.

We saw this, for example, in the demands of young feminists in South Africa: #RhodesMustFall but #PatriarchyMustFall too. This created space for students to critically situate issues such as black feminism, pan-Africanism, gender and sexuality within campaigns to decolonise the education system and reframe education as a human right, not a commodity.



A participant at the Black Feminisms Forum in 2016 in Bahia, Brazil. Photo: None on Record.

4. Intersectionality, all day, every day

African feminist movements are robust. But ideological, generational and tactical differences have created divisions. In some cases, young, poor, trans, queer and sex worker movements have found themselves alienated from older, middle class, cisgendered, straight, and white-collar movements that enjoy more space and mainstream validation.

Deep intersectional organising and challenging intersecting systems of oppression like patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity is crucial to demonstrating solidarity and seeking transformation. We can no longer separate our struggles and this should be reflected in our strategies and demands which should intersect with various oppressions that feminists face. Liberation of one group of society should never be the basis of oppression of another.

In today’s global landscape, challenges inside and outside our feminist movements have sharpened, but so have we. Watch the animation *The state of our feminist movements*, from AWID.

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P.S.

* OPEN DEMOCRACY. 31 July 2017:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/felogene-anumo-and-valerie-bah/four-lessons-african-feminist-organising>

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Footnotes

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kOUMB0t4Kc&list=PLQXDRyjmRaEEW9_zpI2lie-hYgopTIpHF

[2] <https://www.awid.org/resources/state-our-feminist-movements>

[3] <http://www.africanfeministforum.com>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upktb-2J80w>

[5] <http://www.incite-national.org/page/revolution-will-not-be-funded-anthology>

[6] <https://www.ikhtyar.org>

[7] <http://holaafrica.org>

[8] <https://twitter.com/hashtag/afrifem?lang=en>

[9] <http://www.achpr.org/instruments/women-protocol/>

[10] <http://www.africanfeministforum.com/awino-okech/>