and ignored. And when called upon to conduct research and come up with important publications, they reject original research for fear that their husbands might get another wife in their absence. It is easier to stay near the dinner table and collect the crumbs of twisted knowledge and misinformation from the libraries. The situation is bleak because the damage is deep in our psyche. Perhaps this conference has an answer; I have none.

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AFRICAN WOMEN AT THE GRASSROOTS: THE SILENT PARTNERS OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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**INTRODUCTION**

As a political and ideological project, feminism aims at examining and analyzing women’s oppression, thereby exposing the dynamics of male domination and female subordination through history. Feminism as an emancipatory project therefore specifically aims at the total liberation of women from the yoke of tradition expropriated in various dimensions in different historical epochs. According to Gilligan (1982), to understand feminism is to understand the systemic discrimination with which women live every day in a society which recognizes only the male voice as the norm. MacDonald (1989) defines feminism as that which encompasses both a political activism and an academic or theoretical stance, both stressing the lived experience and action of women’s lives as crucial to any understanding of the social aspects of humanity and offering a critique of and a remedy for the prevailing male ideology which influences the lives, the ideas, and the physical, emo-
tional, or financial well-being of women. By this definition, two categories of feminists suffice: the activists and the theorists. While more often than not a feminist in mainstream academia falls into both camps, a social reformer outside the academy remains to a large extent a practitioner, even though both often share the same ideology and goal.

Central to contemporary feminist debates is a growing recognition that sexism, racism, and class exploitation relate in a dialectical way to subjugate women across societies and ethnic groups. Consequently, distinctions of gender, race, and class are not only different experiences for different groups of women, they often impede the pace of building a viable universal sisterhood among feminists. Contemporary feminist writers are therefore seeking a more pluralistic approach that recognizes complexities and differences in women’s life experiences (Lorde, 1981; Dill, 1983; hooks, 1988). This in itself cannot be achieved without a thorough understanding and a continuous reassessment of different socio-cultural formations that make for such differences.

Currently, two major goals of feminism have been identified (see Bunch 1993:249):

1. The freedom from oppression for women involves not only equity, but also the right of women to freedom of choice and the power to control their own lives within and outside of the home; having control over their lives and their bodies is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy for women.

2. The second goal of feminism is the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally. This means the involvement of women in national liberation struggles, in plans for national development, and in local and global struggles for change.

Relevant to this essay is the task of identifying the path and the goal of feminism in Africa; the relevance of Western feminism to women’s liberation movements in Africa; and the reasons for the existence of specific differences in priorities and practice. At the core of this discussion is the fact that, in Africa, most women at the grassroots have yet to identify with the aims and caprices of modern-day feminism. They see feminism as elitist and illusory; yet, to be effective agents of change, African forms of feminism must properly incorporate women at the grassroots. These are the women who not only constitute the large majority, but who continue to be the custodians of African tradition. Therefore, the crucial questions addressed in this essay are:

- Are the feminist priorities for the West and for the Third World nations necessarily the same (in terms of goals, values, and ideals of feminist struggle)?
- Why is it taking so long to eradicate female subordination in the African continent?
- Will the feminist path in Africa be the same as that of the West?

### FEMINIST GOALS, VALUES, AND IDEALS

Feminism in the West predates the upsurge of radical feminism of the late 1960s. In the United States of America, feminism started as the Woman’s Suffrage Movement, led by liberal white women with concerns for the abolition of slavery and for gaining equal rights for all people irrespective of race, class, and sex (Hudson-Weems, 1992). Jaggar and Rothenberg (1993) noted that the feminism of this early period was embarrassingly narrow, representing the interests of white, middle-class women and largely excluding the experience and perspectives of large numbers of women of color. Although issues of race and ethnicity are now gaining more attention in the emerging feminist perspectives, voices of women from many racial and ethnic groups are still to be heard.

Women’s subordination worldwide has been described using various analytical frameworks, including biological determinism, liberalism, classical Marxism, radical feminism, and social feminism. Central to most of these analytical frameworks are the social transformations brought about by modern industrial capitalism in world societies. Thus Jaggar and Rothenberg remarked:

As the world economic system becomes increasingly integrated and both the privileges and the exploitation of women in Western Europe and North America are tied increasingly tightly to the privileges and exploitation of women around the globe, it becomes ever more important for feminism to think and act globally as well as locally. (xiii)

The two major events of the last years of the eighteenth century in Europe—the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution—provided a firm base for capitalism. Industrial capitalism, according to Sheila Rowbotham (1976), resulted in the separation of the workplace from the home, thereby producing roles for women as workers distinct from their roles in the family. Thus, Western women became subjected to a double oppression, at home and in the workplace. Subsequently women have faced an unprecedented choice.
between reproduction (home and children) and production (the ability to participate in the paid labor force). The result of this sudden social transformation and structural alteration has been that production and reproduction are now perceived as parallel (i.e., the domestic versus the public domain, with men as active participants in the public sphere, and women in the domestic sphere).

The biological determinism (i.e., women seen as the weaker sex) and the culturally constructed differences (nature/nurture hypothesis) both influenced social policies and thinking. Thus, in England, for example, women were seen as biologically unsuitable for the rigors of public life and so were not allowed to vote until 1918; to contest elections; to sit in Parliament; or to be employed in the civil service (Mba 1982:3).

Seeing reproduction as a factor to be used to ensure female subordination in the emerging capitalist society, the early radical feminists staged overt shows of liberation—"bra burning," categorizing marriage and childbearing as social responsibilities which the society must pay for, and (at the extreme) a total rejection of motherhood.

Western feminism is currently facing the battle of acceptance both in Africa and in the diaspora. Hudson-Weems (1991) argues that the Western feminist agenda is designed to meet the particular needs of white women. Hudson-Weems sees as "racist arrogance and domination" Western feminism's strategy of placing women's history under white women's history, the latter position being seen as definitive. She therefore opted for the term "African Womanism," which is grounded in African culture and "necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, needs and desires of African women" (Hudson-Weems 1991:6). Bell hooks wrote that "white women liberationists saw feminism as their movement and resisted any efforts by non-white women to critique, challenge or change its direction" (1993:502). She stated that the few African Americans who joined the struggle at the initial stage became disillusioned after finding out that white women in the movement had little knowledge of or concern for the problems of black women across classes. Furthermore, she argues that feminism in North America was undermined by "the narcissism, greed, and individual opportunism of its leading exponents" who are usually the white upper/middle class women (hooks 1993). Feminists from the Third World have criticized major feminist theories which are based on the Western historical experience and which have failed to account for the experiences of black women both in Western societies and in the Third World. This background documents the localized nature of Western feminism and its inability to solve women's oppression in the Third World nations, that have witnessed and continue to undergo a unique process of change—colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, debt crises, food crises, etc.

Many writers (Mbewe, 1990; Oluwole, 1994) who wrote on the plight of the African woman often saw the subordination of African women as a creation of Western intellectual tradition. According to Oluwole (1994), this is because pre-capitalist African society did not impute values into the natural act of discriminating between phenomena. Afonja (1994), expanding Oluwole's thesis, wrote that "just as being male or female carried no specific disadvantages, production and reproduction, domestic/public, productive labor/domestic labor become completely irrelevant to social system of non-capitalist societies." The implication of this is that feminism may not be relevant to a society of this kind where there was no control of one by the other. The central thesis of Oluwole's work is that we may need to confine discussions of feminism to modern society, which has copied evaluative criteria from Western science.

Therefore, African feminism may be better explained within different historical epochs—precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. Although the traditional African system provided some degree of security for the female members, there existed some form of oppression within that very system. According to Mbewe (1990:18), "the fact that women were conditioned to do only specific duties have put limitations to self-development." Other factors within traditional African systems documented in support of some form of female oppression include:

1. the polygynous family arrangement, which gave a male member a certain degree of power as head of the family over his many wives;
2. widowhood practices which to this day subject women to obnoxious practices—e.g., shaving of heads; drinking water used to wash the corpse of the deceased husband where a wife is suspected as the cause of the husband's death; widows eating from broken plates, sleeping in ashes, etc.;
3. arranged marriages, where marriages are contracted without the consent of the bride; and child marriage, where a girl of about 9-11 years becomes a victim of rape by the would-be husband (an adult male who can be as old as the girl's father);
4. inheritance rights which give primacy to male children inheriting from their fathers, while the female children cannot, etc.
Christine Obbo (1980) wrote that ethnographic studies contain information on women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives of male informants and power holders, while the voices of the women themselves are mute. Women in such arrangements, she wrote, are seen as merely assisting their men in the quest for power by building strong networks based on visiting and gossiping with relatives in neighborhoods. Obbo further noted that even in matrilineal societies of Africa, while women may have some advantages in certain types of matrilineal systems, there is still no doubt about the political dominance of men. Birgitta Leander noted that a trend in the literature shows that “true matriarchies—societies in which women appear to have had supreme authority in all aspects—have never existed” (1982:9). The precolonial period recorded no major feminist attacks on African traditional social structure, and not until the colonial era did we record cases of women acting as pressure groups to reject many of colonial economic and political policies (Mba, 1982).

From the above, it could be argued that the traditional African structure set the stage for the subordination of women under capitalist imperialism, both structures interacting in a complex way to further oppress African women. In colonial and postcolonial Africa, the subordination of women is seen at different levels—first, male dominance of the traditional patriarchal social structures; second, domination of women as members of the peripheral societies, subordinated to foreign capitalist males of the metropolitan states; and, thirdly, subordination of women as members of the underpaid working class and impoverished peasantry.

As the continent of Africa is ravaged by war, drought, poverty, disease, illiteracy, and ignorance, women and children have been known to be its most defenseless victims. Even in postcolonial Africa, many of the African states are still battling with neocolonialism. Lesotho and Swaziland, for instance, are examples of neocolonialism at its worst. McFadden (1990), writing on the conditions of women under the grip of a military dictatorship and unprogressive monarchy in both Lesotho and Swaziland, noted that women remain the “poorest of the poor, the least literate, the most exploited, and the most marginalized of all the social groups in those countries.” Even in Botswana, the post-independence wealth “has not led to any changes for women in the political and social spheres either” (McFadden 1990:8). Also in Ethiopia, women under the oppressive feudal and military regimes suffered untold hardship due to inhibitory traditions in the form of superstitions and taboos (e.g., women could not work on the land due to a superstitious belief that if women touched the plough the land would not yield crops; and other obnoxious marriage practices like child marriage, female circumcision, and women’s lack of legal right to divorce). However, the strength and determination of Ethiopian women to free themselves from the yoke of tradition and imminent death were seen as they fought the 17-year people’s revolutionary war side by side with their men. This is revisiting the past, for, according to Sudarkasa, women in African societies “were literally expected to shoulder their own burdens,” and in many contexts, respect and responsibility, as well as rights and privileges, were accorded without reference to gender” (1989:36).

For the African woman, fighting for survival remains a priority in post-independence African states that are facing economic crises. No doubt, this gender condition has further exacerbated gender inequities in postcolonial Africa. This is particularly so where households in an African context are imbued with the values of the Western nuclear family (as against the traditional context in which households function as complex units, with the roles of the individual household members complementing rather than competing). Today, the survival of poor families from the devastating socio-economic situation on the continent depends largely on the strategies adopted by women. African women today are not only engaged in a variety of income-earning and income saving activities for the survival of their families, they have also started to lead protests against tyrannical regimes and inhuman macroeconomic policies such as Structural Adjustment Program.

However, the African woman today is concerned not only with overcoming the problems of foreign domination/rule, but also with the specific, immediate needs of surviving famine, hunger, drought, disease, and war. To be empowered, African women, unlike their Western sisters, are struggling not just to attain political power but also to be empowered by gaining access to a good education and the professions, among other things. Many of the issues which are of concern to the African feminist are often left out of the Western feminist agenda, i.e.:

1. how to successfully combine her mothering and nurturing roles with her productive roles;
2. how to make the men appreciate and join her to fight against societal oppressive structures created by both men and women, and not necessarily fighting against men;
3. how to fight oppressive traditions such as child marriage and
widowhood taboos; and how to retain those traditional structures which are supportive of women (e.g., social safety nets provided women by the traditional extended family system);

(4) how to devise coping mechanisms for stable marital relations (coping with polygyny; mother/sister-in-law taboos and conflicts; inheritance rights; etc.);

(5) how to build a bridge between the traditional African communal life and the emerging individualistic tendencies of the modern capitalist relations, etc.

Many of the issues listed above are peripheral to the ideals, values, and goals of Western feminism, whereas the issue of heterosexuality versus lesbianism/homosexuality is gaining both public and legislative attention in the West. While Western feminism is now faced with puzzles emerging from these two worlds (lesbianism/homosexuality and heterosexuality), African feminism is only thinking of social relations within the heterosexual relations. To the latter, issues of rights for the gays and lesbians are outside its agenda. This is because for many African societies lesbianism and homosexuality are nothing but abominations. Contrary to this, some Western feminists see heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women, and therefore to be changed (Rich, 1999:158). While Western feminism exists within a structure which had successfully broken away from fetters of tradition, African feminism operates within a framework that sees tradition as inherently part of the present.

THE SLOW PACE OF ACTIVE FEMINISM IN AFRICA

A full-fledged radical feminism has failed to emerge on the African continent till now despite the long history of female resistance to destructive socio-political systems. That history has the Nigerian experience of the popular Igbo Women’s War of 1929 (Van Allen, 1976); the mass movement in Nigeria of the Abokuta Women’s Union (AWU) and demonstrations against flat rate tax of the Egba women (Mba, 1982); and the overall participation of African women in liberation struggles against colonial rule and oppressive feudal and military regimes (e.g., South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Guinea Bissau, etc.). Sign Arnfred (1988), writing on the implications of the activities of the Mozambican women in the country’s revolutionary struggle, remarked that

before the war, men and women had led separate lives with a clear division of labor and different rules of conduct. During the war they came together on equal terms as Mozambicans in the struggle against the Portuguese. In this process, gender relations changed. Some women developed a new concept of themselves as women: new aspirations, new goals. (8)

However, fighting a liberation war is quite different from building a nation state and it seems that what the Mozambican women gained during the war years was taken away from them as gender relations returned to the pre-war situation. Thus Arnfred wrote: “men took back what they had lost of patriarchal power...even more than they had” (9).

The dilemma facing a full-fledged development of feminism in Africa makes it appropriate to ask the same question Filomina Steady asked a few years back: "What are the roots of African feminism?" Steady (1987) argued that a major stumbling block to feminism in Africa is the reality of separating gender domination and exploitation inherent in African culture from a double oppression of African women caused by the processes of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid, an act which has often resulted in conflicting assessments of the status of African women.

The conflicting theoretical assumptions about the impact of development on the status of African women has no doubt slowed down the pace of developing a viable feminist orientation in Africa. For example, the proponents of modernization theory consider life in “traditional” societies as limiting women’s access to resources, decision-making power, and employment opportunities. According to Susan Tiano (1981), however, modernists wrongly claim that modernization improves women’s situation by expanding their occupational choices and by increasing their natural security. From a modernist viewpoint, colonialism is seen as raising the living and educational standards of African women and ultimately freeing women from the drudgery of farm labor and the oppression embedded in African social customs. The orthodox Marxist perspective also joins this debate. Though full gender equality is assumed to be achievable only within the socialist framework, both Marx and Engels, having hypothesized that the demand for female wage labor would free women from dependence on their husbands and from male dominance within the family, thought they were witnessing the beginnings of women’s liberation in nineteenth-century capitalist society. Afonja (1994) identified the inappropriateness of
orthodox Marxist concepts in explaining such micro-level processes as intra-household dynamics. A theoretical scheme which separates home and work undermines the complex nature of household economies in the Third World and their relationship to the national economy. This observation is very important because the household is such an important locus of struggle and exploitation.

In Africa, the linkage between theory and practice is compelling. For a long time, the first generation of African women with Western education saw themselves as different and privileged. For them, life ceases to be village life with its domestic drudgeries. They aspire to city life, associated with leisure and freedom from tradition and customs. For both men and women, the general mentality changed with the introduction of Western education. For example, a new mode of thought emerged, which assumed that all that is "Western" is better than what is "African." The change in mentality brought about changes in widely different aspects of life—language, dressing, ways of knowing, etc. The change also affected societal institutions. More importantly, the changes brought about by Western civilization created a gap and a division between rural and urban dwellers and this rural/urban split to a large extent determined relations between women.

The early literature on African women, and subsequently on social change, generally measured quality of life principally by educational level, access to paid employment, and access to modern amenities such as hospitals, transportation, pipe-borne water, and schools. Important to the assumed positive view of the female status is the wave of changes taking place within African societies, changes such as

1. reduction in child marriage (as girls are encouraged to go to school);
2. reduced emphasis on virginity (as the phenomenon of "bridal night" becomes a thing of the past, and a girl now makes her own choice in matters of marriage and career);
3. the new wave of monogamous marriage amongst the elites is also seen positively as a source of status-building for the woman.

The major dilemma of the elite women in most African nations is that they are so protective of the status quo which they believe marriage offers. Educated women tend to marry men who are more educated than they are. Thereby, such women gain better life styles and higher social status through their husbands. Traditionally, the African woman was accorded respect depending on her husband's social status. This is to say that the status of the majority of women within the indigenous African setting hinged so much on their marital status, except for the very few who became powerful through success in trade, as recorded amongst the Nupes of Northern Nigeria. Women who acquired high social status independent of the men in their lives are easily described and seen in negative terms—witches, prostitutes, free women, etc. Husbands of such women are not only disrespected, they also become objects of gossip in the community. For example, among the Yorubas, local expressions still exist by which husbands of powerful women or successful women are described. Such phrases include O ti ra ni yẹ, O ti so di didinrin, and O han ma ni iyannu.

It is important to note that many contradictions exist in the way the status of women is viewed in many African societies. Such contradictions are found in the use of traditional proverbs and idioms. Yusuf (1994) identified age-old Yoruba proverbs which give contradictory views about the position of women in the society. Such contradictory views incite both negative and positive feelings towards the female. Consequently, such contradiction reinforces the cultural suppression of women and at the same time creates for them access to positive self-expression in traditionally male-dominated areas. The African woman is therefore traditionally equipped with tools for challenging repressive traditions, depending upon her own personal ingenuity.

Access to formal education is today seen as a great achievement for women, although many of these women have no feminist consciousness. Some of them are placid towards marital issues. Often the educated African woman does not want to be described in negative terms and she does not want to appear militant even when her personal well-being is at stake because of the fear of losing social respect or facing up to the social disrespect that being unmarried brings. Therefore, many of the elite women for a long time were more concerned with protecting their status quo, than with developing an interest in modern feminist issues which aim at fighting their persistent domination by men and the exertion of patriarchal arrangements. Women who engaged in feminist causes are described variously as "free-women," "the rejects," or "the beatenos." Thus, a lot of people, especially women, who believe in equal rights for both men and women often shy away from being labeled "feminists" or "women's libber." According to Obadina (1985), the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has got itself such a bad name mainly because of the bad reporting from the male-domi-
press which focuses on the bizarre and the outrageous aspects of WLM to the exclusion of its engagement with more important concerns such as the fight for fundamental human rights. Furthermore, this negative impression is due to the direction the WLM has taken, a direction which most people assume is increasingly on female sexuality and female separateness. Thus, it appears that Western feminism appears to have directed against the family, thus creating for African feminists the extra of including family values on their feminist agenda, in an attempt to demonstrate that feminist development could not pose a threat or constitute a contradiction to a cohesive family life.

The first major task has thus been to create a unique platform African feminism so as to make it more appealing. The need to create such an appealing platform has sometimes led to romanticization of the African past. Thus, many African writers have been subordinated of women to men to the emergence of new industrial capitalist development in the continent. Such works failed to critically examine the traditional social structure, which provided the fertile ground for the breeding of foreign values which further encouraged gender inequalities. Also, Western concepts such as "public versus domestic domains," and supplementary versus competition" debates which provided atomistic views of male and female roles have been found to be inappropriate for understanding the conditions of African men. Human life in Africa is viewed from a holistic rather than dichotomous and exclusive perspective. For according to Steady, "for women, the male is not 'the other' but part of the same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that forms the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite possession of unique features of its own" (8).

To me, the above observation reveals what a complex knot to feminism in Africa, and that the success of feminism there depend not only on raising the consciousness of women but on much cooperation women receive from the men in creating a humane world, i.e., devoid of gender oppression. When I look at what they gain from the existing patriarchal relations, very likely that they will fight tooth and nail against all that feminism stands for, because feminism will change not only their men, but "a part of their total self." This is to say that gender oppression in Africa might be more enduring, though subtle, while task of feminism in Africa might demand even more ingenuity to make a break through. This leads our discussion to feminist paths and priorities in Africa.

**FEMINIST PATHS AND PRIORITIES IN AFRICA**

Seeking the root of African feminism in African cosmological past presents different priorities for African feminism, separate from those of the West. For example, contradictions exist within a structure of assumed egalitarian relationship where men and women might be hierarchically related to each other in certain reciprocal statuses but not in others. Sudarkasa (1989) wrote that both contradiction and congruence characterized the status-clusters termed female and male, thereby making it problematic for African societies to consistently stratify status categories, one against the other, but, rather, codify complementarity. An African woman thus finds it difficult to act spontaneously when one of the statuses within the cluster is at stake, for she has to give consideration to the effect of her single act on her other status roles such as wife, sister, mother, daughter, community member, etc. The individual sees himself or herself as a member of a group and possesses more loyalty to the group than to self, even when it means preserving elements of outright subordination of a particular sex, usually the female sex.

Different feminist priorities are therefore created by African social structure. For example, as mentioned earlier, there is the tendency to overplay traditional complementarity in gender roles, to the neglect of inherent traditional subjugation and exploitation of women. Such an approach neglects inherent conflicts in African social structure which have been used to serve the interests of capital. This also explains why legislation against bigamy in most African countries functions only on paper and is hardly enforced. Also, the destructive effects of polygyny are underplayed, even as the society changes from a predominantly subsistence economy to a modern industrial capitalist system. Not only do men and women struggle over the available limited resources, the relationship among the household members become very calculative. With the unique history of racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism in Africa, it becomes easy to overlook sexual oppression and to face those other forms of oppression which are seen as demanding more urgent solutions.

Unlike in the West, in most African countries, middle class women for example, do not have to battle over sharing of housework with husbands—or, until recently (due to deepening eco-
onomic crises), fight over jobs in the labor market. Until recently, the number of educated women were few and they were trained in traditional female occupations such as nursing, teaching, and service jobs. Since women were often not sufficiently trained to compete in managerial and other male-traditional jobs, very few women either showed interest in such jobs/positions or developed consciousness about gender discrimination in the workplace. Also, because of support networks provided by other women (e.g., relatives who live-in to give childcare services or housemaids and nannies eager for employment), the burden of housework and childcare became lighter. Today, this reality is changing. The dreaded "housemaid syndrome" is now gaining public and research attention, as most families can no longer afford the extra expense of keeping a housemaid. Thus, unforeseen hardships now face nursing mothers as they combine reproductive and productive roles. Unlike Western women, African women cannot afford the leisure of being full-time housewives because they face both marital and extramarital social responsibilities. An educated woman could not afford not to work because she is responsible not only to her husband but also to her extended family members. Not only would she have to work to pay off debts incurred for training her in school, she is also obliged to train some of the other junior siblings. The realities of colonization, whereby the labor of both men and women was undervalued and underpaid, forced both men and women to work for survival needs. The wage of the husband is never enough to care for the family's subsistence needs, particularly in a society that is inherently polygynous.

The political and economic rights which Western women have been fighting for over decades are guaranteed constitutionally for most African women. For example, the Nigerian Labor Act of 1974 and the 1979 Nigerian Constitution make specific provisions concerning female employment. The Labor Act guarantees the woman both maternity and night-duty protection, while the 1979 Nigerian Constitution (Section 39) guarantees her right to freedom from discrimination, thus making it possible for men and women to have equal access to employment. The problem is not that these laws do not exist; the problem is with full implementation and enforcement. Akpala identified two cases of outright discrimination against women in Nigeria. First is the case of Miss E. F. Sunday, a holder of OND in Mining Engineering who was refused employment as a mining engineer in the Ministry of Mines and Power on grounds that she is a woman. The other case is that involving Miss Idogisit Ntem, a Solicitor General for Akwa Ibom State, who was denied appointment as a Judge by the Advisory Judicial Commission on the grounds that she is a single parent. Also in Namibia, as in many other African states, many outdated colonial legal systems are still unchanged, particularly in areas concerning marriage, divorce, custody and maintenance, and property acquisition. For example, a woman could not own property separate from her husband. The husband has power to make decisions about property without the wife's consent, but the wife cannot make such decisions without her husband's consent. In many cases, a wife can neither purchase property nor obtain bank loans without a male figure. As it is in Namibia so it is in many African states. In Nigeria, policy on income tax is in favor of men. Men, as the presumed breadwinners in the homes, are the ones entitled to child allowance, thus leaving female-headed households at a disadvantage.

In recent times the reality of female subjugation in Africa has become more obvious, while the need for a more radical women's liberation movement becomes a matter of urgency because only such a move could separate female oppression from other forms of oppression facing the continent and trace the root of female oppression in Africa beyond capitalism to traditional patriarchal structures.

FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AFRICA

Notably, the growth of feminism in Africa has differed from that in the West. For example, while the women's movement in the West began as a political movement and gradually emerged as an intellectual discourse, the reverse is the case in most African states. In Africa, feminist consciousness has been left to a few elite women, who are mostly in academia. Although there are recorded cases of female resistance to some exploitative socio-political systems in the past, these, it is argued, did not aim specifically at changing the inequality in the traditional structure of gender relations (Mba, 1982).

While different women's societies/associations exist within the continent, most of them lack feminist orientation. Women are frequently organized around definite economic, religious, professional, ethnic, and class interests. The most active ones have been the group organized around economic interests: market women
associations or those organized around religious interests, that provide immediate material and social benefits as well as emotional support. However, some war-torn countries such as Ethiopia, Namibia, and Mozambique are currently witnessing the emergence of militant women’s organizations.

There are many problems that militate against organizing African women. First, the factors which continue to disunite most African countries as national entities are also the forces that make it difficult to organize women. Women continue to be loyal first to their respective ethnic groups and religions before expressing loyalty to gender unity. Another major barrier is the disunity created by language. Ogundipe-Leslie notes that:

the reactions of the women differ from class to class. Women of the urban working class, the urban poor, and the peasantry have different attitudes. They insist more on their right to work as they very often have to live within polygynous systems, Islamic religion and traditions. They tend to ignore the biological and emotional oppression they have to endure, in the view that men are incorrigibly polygynous and that women are socially impotent to correct them. They insist only on the right to have their children fathered, sexually and financially while they expect little from men in terms of companionship, personal care and fidelity (245).

The above quote is in agreement with our claim that most African women lack consciousness with respect to the issue of human rights and that women generally focus less on their own personal well-being. For example, what is viewed in the West as wife battering, child abuse, bigamy, etc., is sometimes accepted by women as that enduring part of marriage which should be settled out of court. Sometimes the ability of the women to endure such outright brutality from their husbands determines the type of social respect married women are accorded. Thus, it is not uncommon to see the majority of women taking such abuses as part of motherhood. For example, among the Yorubas, a common phrase of the doting wife and mother is: titiri omo ni mo se njija. This notion becomes an enduring fact in a society which gives all rights over children, including child custody, to the father.

Today, the agonies of development are variously felt by African women. Women do not only face job discrimination and sex segregation of jobs within the formal labor market, but they also face stiff competition from men even in traditional female jobs, particularly within the informal labor market which was traditionally controlled by women. The current economic wars and debt crises globally, particularly those in African states, and the impact of structural adjustment programs on quality of life lay a more rigorous foundation for assessing the relevance of feminist ideals in contemporary African society. Both scholars and reformists are now pressed to solve the problem of poverty in the continent, while many have directly linked the “woman question” with the African crisis (e.g., as in the food crisis).

As in the West, varieties of academic feminism have long existed on the continent, ranging from the conservative approach of the colonial period, the liberal-reformist approach of the nationalist period, and the socialist feminist model of the post-independence era. However, feminist trends are not the same for all African states, the current trends in research have become more radical in their approaches, challenging the epistemological basis of traditional knowledge about gender relations and about established gender myths. Therefore in Africa, within the last fifteen years, research projects on the conditions of African women have gained momentum; courses on women have been introduced at both undergraduate and graduate levels; and a great number of articles focusing on gender relations have been written in national and international journals. In many African states, the National Women’s Commission has been established. In 1982, Nigeria witnessed the emergence of a new women’s organization, Women in Nigeria (WIN), with Western socialist feminist tendencies. WIN has gained recognition for its major achievement in establishing research/teaching about women using socialist feminist ideology. Ironically, most of the more recent feminist groups tend to be elitist and identify more with their international sister organizations in Europe and America. Such academic movements are closely linked with women at the grassroots level. Women at the grassroots continue to use traditional structures such as cooperatives and other forms of women organizations to combat the negative effects of the development process in their lives. For the first time in the history of most African states, gender-specific programs are introduced particularly through the help of national governments and development agencies. However, no major attacks have been launched on the existing patriarchal order. Rather, national governments, which most of the time have sustained gender inequality through their policies, and international agencies run mainly by men, ironically tend to be responsible for shaping the
direction of change in women’s lives.

The present state of feminism in Africa needs proper reappraisal if the emancipatory nature of feminism is to be realized. First, not only do grassroots women lack appropriate conceptual definitions of feminism, there is a general lack of trust between rural grassroots women and the elite women who are mostly in the cities. The grassroots women see the elite women as privileged and opportunistic. Also, in a continent besieged with poverty, grassroots women are more preoccupied with basic economics of living than with sociopolitical issues. To worsen the situation, most of the women in the forefront of feminist engagement share different life experiences from those of the women in the grassroots. Because of their different social background, urban elite women lack knowledge of village living, and its attendant drudgeries. It thus becomes difficult for such Western trained women to identify appropriately with grassroots women and organize them politically.

Although some women within the academy and few political reformists have started to build feminist consciousness across the continent through feminist research and political programs, a lot remains to be done. The ability of the “First Lady Syndrome” to effectively mobilize African women has been questioned. First is the general criticism levelled against grandiose government programs targeted at grassroots women: such programs, in which there is much waste, not only take a great share of the government budget, but end up not benefiting the majority of the rural women. The Better Life Program for Nigerian Rural Women has been criticized for its lack of coordination, introduction of inappropriate technology to women, and failure to conscientize women toward self-determination. Secondly, it is argued that many of these “First Ladies” lack adequate education, and managerial know-how; thus, they do not often provide the right leadership for women’s programs. Thirdly, because of the general political instability in the continent, there is lack of continuity in many of the government programs targeted at women.

It is important however to note the diversity of the continent in terms of culture, political structures, and economic fortunes. All of these create different structures of gender oppression, requiring different treatment. It is therefore not surprising to see women from the socialist states of Africa and those in the war zones being more militant in the struggle against double oppression—male chauvinism and capitalist imperialism.

A major task facing the growth of feminism in the continent is how to appropriately bridge the gap which now exists between the few elite who are more concerned with feminist struggles on the one hand and, on the other, the non-feminist conscious elites and the grassroots women, both of whom are in large majority. The future of feminism on the continent depends on how the few feminist-conscious female elites and these other groups of women (especially the women at the grassroots) become conscious of the reality of their social situation, as well as on their readiness to come together to fight for democratic rights. It appears that many of the existing women organizations are nothing but government megaphones. Only organizations which operate with some detachment from the government can present a more profound resourcefulness in confronting the dilemmas of the precarious, sexist, male-centric world, and moving towards the creation of neither a man’s world nor a woman’s, but of a human world. For example, the Nigerian National Council of Women’s Societies has been accused of being more concerned with demonstrating solidarity with the government than with promoting the interests of Nigerian women (Mustapha, 1985).

A more common bond, irrespective of class, religion, and ethnic origins, is today witnessed between women in the war zones of Africa. No wonder, Professor Wangari Maathai, a leading figure in Kenya’s civil rights campaign, was one of those beaten unconscious during one of the Kenyan women’s protests against the unlawful detention of some political prisoners in Kenya. Also, women in Ethiopia, South Africa, and Mozambique have fought revolutionary wars side by side with their men, creating a bond of trust between those two groups. Hilda (1985), itemizing the contributions of South African women against the collapsed apartheid regime, wrote: “young and angry, old and undefeated, their continuing defense in the face of persecution, torture, and terrible loss, challenges apartheid, destroys myths of female subservience and subservience” (110).

A similar situation is witnessed in Nigeria against repressive military rules. The spontaneity with which grassroots women in Southwest Nigeria engaged in public demonstrations to see the demise of the Babangida regime is indicative of the potentiality in female struggles. Ironically, there tends to be a paradigm shift back to “normal” in gender relations after the wars, so that the war of gender equality still remains to be fought and won.

To bridge the gap which now exists between men and women, particularly between the female elites and grassroots women, efforts should be intensified to empower the grassroots women whose
works, while central to the process of development, yet generally go unappreciated/unrecognized. The first task is to understand the knowledge and practices in the respective local communities in order to know the type of knowledge and practices appropriate for empowering women. This is best done using the participatory approach in which all citizens, particularly women, contribute to the process of change. Secondly, it is important to raise women’s consciousness about oppressive structures which are created by men or women. Thirdly, efforts should be geared towards making available to women with the least legitimate power the basic ingredients for empowerment—i.e., formal education, control over their own sexuality, critical resources (land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurial skills). Finally, it will be necessary to challenge policies which subordinate women in the society.

The female elites could play a pivotal role in achieving equality for women in the continent if they would focus on (a) forming pressure groups to lobby for legislative changes, (b) carrying out researches which can further unveil problems in "women development" programs, and (c) suggesting appropriate/alternative development programs for women at the grassroots.

CONCLUSION

Feminism should not stop at mere access to economic independence and social benefits; rather, it should also focus on the psychological development of the total self, whereby women would see themselves as just as capable as men are of changing the world in which they live.

The goals, values, and ideals of feminism remain the same across regions—i.e., liberating the society from dehumanization and repairing the loss of fundamental human rights—even though women are separated as much by class, ethnicity, religion, and other social situations as by geography. This calls for creating different tactics of organizing across groups. However, the path to full feminism in the Third World might not be the same as in the West because of differences in emphasis and priorities. African feminism tends to be broader in scope, far broader than what is conceived by white women as feminist priorities, for African women are concerned not only about sexism, but also they recognize racism as part of their conundrum. African feminists have not only to question concepts and redraw blueprints, they also have to make feminism relevant to the reality of African social formations.

Presently, in most African nations, the modern vision of feminism is still at its infancy, and remains a mere academic exercise. This is because many African feminist writers shy away from activism, for fear of being described as “women-libbers.” Consciousness about feminism in Africa has not cut across classes, and grassroots women have often been left out of feminist agenda. The major problem is how to bring together women within and across national boundaries, to become conscious of their beings and believe that the essence of feminism is to rebuild and not destroy the society itself.

Finally, some strategies for building an all-inclusive sisterhood both at the national and international levels are hereby identified:

1. Identify feminist priorities within nation states. It should be assumed that the nature and context of female subordination differs within and across national boundaries. Therefore, scholars need to develop feminist priorities within contextual—i.e., local—frameworks and prescribe appropriate solutions.

2. Despite group differences and interests, a “pan-feminist” awareness should be created among women such that feminist interests could be developed above other group interests.

3. Women’s groups with feminist interests need to operate with some detachment from the government. This can only be achieved if the government is not the sole source of financial sustenance for such women groups.

4. A central question to be asked is: "Can feminist ideals be achieved in Africa without a political movement or a revolution?" For many of the African nations, the answer is “No,” although the intensity of such social transformation may differ from one nation-state to the other. This is as a result of differences in the intensity of societal attitudes towards gender-related issues in each nation-state.

Finally, I believe that a full-fledged feminism can emerge in Africa only when there is a merger between activism and the academy, and only when African women at the grassroots level abandon their present position as silent partners to become active partners of the movement. However, to create a global feminist consciousness, I agree with Charlotte Bunch that it is important to have a sense of connectedness among women activists at the grassroots level in the various regions, such that women’s oppression in one region of the world becomes the central concern of feminists the world over. In the words of bell hooks, “to be ‘feminist’ in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression.”(507)
NOTES

1. The phrase "women at the grassroots" refers to women of low socio-economic status, particularly the non-literate rural women and the urban poor. Most such women have been denied access to formal education and modern political power.

2. "Elite women" denotes women who have been exposed to and have benefitted from Western education, modern employment, and are themselves sometimes part of the ruling elites. They comprise both the ruling elites (by their own right or by virtue of being married to the male ruling elites) and non-ruling elites with relative economic independence. Because this class is not homogeneous, members' vision of change depends on their vantage point within the structure.

3. This phrase literally means that the wife has cast a spell on the husband such that he has lost all control to exert power over his wife.

4. This means that the wife has caused the husband to lose memory, vision and intellect.

5. It means that the specific roles of 'wife' and 'husband' have been interchanged through casting of spell or witchcraft.

6. "Free women," and "the rejects" are used of women who could not marry because no man wants them.

7. "Been-tos" means women who have spent most of their lives abroad and have been totally Westernized.

8. The phrase literally means: "I am (the woman) enduring all the domestic victimizations because of my children."


WORKS CITED


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**IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE TO DELIVER THIS KEYNOTE address on "Women and Creative Writing in Africa." I think that two factors make it appropriate for me to be so honored: (1) this first international conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy, being held here in Nsukka, is convened by one of my brilliant students from the 1960s, Dr. Obioma Nnaemeka; and (2) my capacity as one of the oldest—if not the oldest—of women writers in Africa. Let me say right away that I have not quite prepared a keynote address. On Thursday, July 9th, on arrival at the Enugu airport from Amsterdam where I attended the fifth international Feminist Book Fair, I saw the convener, Dr. Obioma Nnaemeka, who told me: "Auntie, you must come. We have already sent you an invitation." I had thought that the conference was to start on July 17th. But first, I had to travel home (Ugwuta) to see my 83-year-old mother and report my safe arrival. The conference opened on Monday and I was here on Monday and Tuesday. So what I am going to share with you today (Wednesday) is the world of my creative writing, not quite put together as I would have wished.

In 1980, a woman journalist with the *Guardian of London* interviewed me and came out with this headline: "Running out of Boredom." You see, I had told her truthfully in the interview that I