



## AFRICA WOMEN STEERING INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

### A GLIMPLSE INTO THE HARVARD CONVENING

*How are you mama Africa? I am here!*



A venerable group of feminist NGO leaders, activists, corporate executives, donors, academics, students, entrepreneurs, lawyers, researchers and many other professionals presented themselves at Harvard University for a two day convening on African women's leadership. The convening was organized by Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-Africa) and the Human Rights Program at the Harvard Law School. Other allies and partners collaborated. It was colourful, enriching, and graced with multifaceted narratives of the struggle for women's rights in all its dynamics, contradictions and depth.

In moments, the discussions inspired, motivated and challenged whilst in others it saddened and drained. There was room for both fire and water. The thick narratives were sliced through with poetic performances by artists, Rudo Chigudu and Coumba Toure, who provided 'food for the soul'. In a poetic explosion, Coumba Toure asked, **'How are you mama Africa?'** And the participants' own explosion of **'I am here'** rang over the two days as a call and response to ensure that they continued to be seen and present to the discussions and to each other.

With the knowledge, activism, experience and intellectual capacity of those in the room, Harvard became a vessel for collective and individual reflection, harnessing energies, contestation, theorising, pausing for celebration and coming together to collate African women's narratives. It was also a platform for bringing the United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, its Platform for Action (BPFA) and the 2015 Development Agenda into the room.

Issues discussed ranged from globalization and the export oriented neo-liberal macro-economic policy frameworks which today provide an 'enabling environment' for big capitalist firms, and not for the majority of small-scale producers; liberalisation and privatisation that have had a largely negative impact on the welfare and incomes of marginalised women and their communities; fundamentalisms that are used to terrorise women; new forms of migrant labour that have increased the risks of exploitation of young women; control of productive natural resources such as land, forests, minerals, water and food by the rich; ongoing struggles by communities surrounding large scale extractive industry, and environmental degradation; high speed technology has opened doors for opportunity at the same time providing medium of harassment and abuse for women; growing lack of peace, human security and exclusive socio-economic and political processes taking place which are ignoring women and the marginalized and a loss of space for public dialogue on a continent governed by self-interest. Above all, the convening shared stories of how women's activism has steadily increased and deepened over the last three decades, in response to this rather bleak emerging scenario. Through the depth of discussions, it became apparent that women need to develop the faculties to notice what urgent and strategic interventions are needed or else 'we become overwhelmed and burnt out.'

The convening concluded that the work ahead requires an understanding of the context in which 'we are living and working', being aware of what is happening to the people and having the political lens to read the signs of our times. As emphasized by Professor Amina Mama in her summary of proceedings, thinking activists and practitioners must have political skills. This requires learning from our ancestors, current feminists and activists, as well as creativity to find new leadership forms and tools and go forward. "We make the path by walking it" and it's not just any kind of path that we are making but one constructed by African transformative feminist leaders

## SO THAT YOU KNOW...

Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our past as a continent – diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonisation, liberation struggles, neo-colonialism, globalisation, etc. Modern African States were built off the backs of African feminists who fought alongside men for the liberation of the continent. As we craft new African States in this new millennium, we also craft new identities for African women, identities as full citizens, free from patriarchal oppression, with rights of access, ownership and control over resources and our own bodies and utilising positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways. We also recognise that our pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial histories and her stories require special measures to be taken in favour of particular African women in different contexts.

We acknowledge the historical and significant gains that have been made by the African Women's Movement over the past forty years, and we make bold to lay claim to these gains as African feminists – they happened because *African feminists* led the way, from the grassroots level and up; they strategised, organised, networked, went on strike and marched in protest, and all that it took for States, employers and institutions to acknowledge women's personhood.

As African feminists, we are also part of a global feminist movement against patriarchal oppression in all its manifestations. Our experiences are linked to that of women in other parts of the world with whom we have shared solidarity and support over the years. As we assert our space as African feminists, we also draw inspiration from our feminist ancestors who blazed the trail and made it possible to affirm the rights of African women. As we invoke the memory of those women whose names are hardly ever recorded in any history books, we insist that it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported into Africa from the West<sup>1</sup>.

It's against this understanding and background that UAF-Africa and The Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School organised a two day convening for African women and those living in the Diaspora to claim their right to theorise, write, strategise and speak for themselves.

The convening was an opportunity because it took place during the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 59th Session; it was a platform that UAF-Africa took advantage of. It also enhanced the work that UAF-Africa has been doing in promoting African women's leadership on the African continent (see annex 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, [www.africanfeministforum.com/the-charter-of-feminist](http://www.africanfeministforum.com/the-charter-of-feminist).

## **REFRAMING AND NURTURING AFRICAN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP:**

Urgent Action Fund Global (UAF) was founded in 1997 and its sister, UAF-Africa opened its office in Nairobi in 2001 following The United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, which produced the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). The co-founders identified a severe gap between activists' needs in the face of crises or unexpected political opportunities and the resources available to them, especially in areas experiencing armed conflict or escalating violence.

Through funding urgently, rapidly, timely and strategically; the Fund provides stepping stones for activists to take advantage of political openings, respond to unanticipated situations and opportunities for action that need urgent attention or hold the line, even in the most volatile situations. The funding and support is done in full view, working with the women's movement every step along the way to make sure the constituency is engaged in the work and able to hold the Fund accountable to its mission.

Using convenings and collaborative initiatives for action oriented advocacy and evidence based research with partners, UAF-Africa hones her capacity as a supporter for "silo-busting", forging generative and productive relationships and bringing different groups and organisations that are accustomed to working in isolation together. The Fund enhances the women's movement by using its strategic position on the continent and in the world of feminist philanthropy to build bridges and alliances among diverse interests, catalysing debates on topical and urgent issues while playing a critical role in bringing women at the margins to the centre of debates related to women's rights.

Inspired by feminist dreams of justice, UAF-Africa organizes aggressive and effective outreaches on the African continent to make sure that its goals are clear and that as much input as possible is gained from those who are likely to be most affected by UAF-Africa's work. Identifying and supporting a cross section of organisations including those courageous enough to "detonate" stigma and taboo related to issues of sex and sexuality.

By playing a double role as both a social justice urgent grant-maker and a 'convener' UAF-Africa is able to act as a bridge between activists, other social justice organisations as well as some progressive untraditional actors, linking resources and needs, as well as good will and good ideas. It's a Fund that is constantly emerging.



## TOWARDS ENHANCING AGENCY

*'We are living in a complex world, it has shifted and we need to enhance our own capacities by thinking beyond our local capacities; hence the importance of thinking locally, regionally and globally, seeing the interconnectedness of issues and then acting locally', said the Director of UAF-Africa, Ndana Bofu-Tawamba.*

UAF-Africa has never shied away from holding free, open spaces with possibilities of co-creation with both the usual and unusual strategic partners. UAF-Africa is also a transnational feminist organisation that always considers the global impact of the issues for which it advocates. It's against this background that UAF-Africa, under the auspices of the **'Women Steering Innovative Leadership in Africa'** dialogue series, conceptualised the Harvard convening. The convening was organised in collaboration with The Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School and the Ford Foundation-East Africa Office, OSISA and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' FLOW who collectively saw an urgent need to convene a roundtable discussion on the role of African Women in the Post 2015 Development Agenda and the +20 Beijing review process. The convening was designed to assess progress, detours as well as gaps and challenges that remain as the world marks 20 years since the adoption of the Platform for Action. The +20 Beijing review created an opportunity for galvanizing energies to reaffirm and strengthen political commitment, mobilize old and new actors, and advocate for the investments required towards realising gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment. Coupling these conversations with the Post 2015 Development Agenda seemed to the partnership, like a golden opportunity for collective reflection and strategizing.

The roundtable brought together seventy African women leaders of varied ages and backgrounds from across the socio- economic and political spheres; women's rights advocates, femocrats, academics, human rights champions, AU representatives, corporates media women and thought leaders. Over two days the participants engaged in lively debates, challenged, questioned, celebrated, reflected and analysed prevailing discourses and situations in African states and thought deeply about existing opportunities. It was clear from the diversity of participants that the solutions would require multi-pronged approaches as well as the feminist lens, courage, compassion and intellect of all women in the social, economic as well as political spheres. It would also require the exchange of strategies within and across different countries, organisations/institutions and cultures. Transformation in only one sphere would fall far short of the desired goal.

So the convening!

*The participants listened to each other; they listened with curiosity and respect waiting for what was to emerge from different and diverse voices. They listened while they also immersed themselves in conversation and enriched debates.*

Through engaging with multi-disciplinary constituency of women leaders it was anticipated that the platform would be used as a vessel within which to make sense of some of the progress made in attaining gender equality and reflecting on innovative strategies for closing the remaining huge gaps.

They were united by the deep conviction that equality and non-discrimination are neither wishes nor privileges; they are rights. So in the famous Ames Court Room, Austin Hall, at Harvard Law School, the conversation unfolded and the exploration began.

## SETTING THE STAGE WITH OPENING REMARKS

Powerful African women from different backgrounds stamped their presence in the room. Each carrying the unique experiences of their nations; Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire, South Africa, U.S.A and representing different interest groups. All came together with one agenda and a strong sense of possibility; Africa's development through decision making, thought leadership in private and public sectors of African economies as well as promotion of leadership that is horizontal, participatory, inclusive and feminist.

The convening started with opening remarks as indicated below.

In her opening remarks **Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro, President & CEO** of Global Fund for Women, a women's rights funding mechanism based in the USA, emphasised the importance of investing and resourcing women's rights work. She lamented that whereas women had been organising since time immemorial, funds are not always directed where they are needed most and that linkages between goals, strategies, activities and resources must be clear and constantly reflected on if women's rights work is to continue in the midst of dwindling resources. She asserted that the current moment was not for poor management of resources but rather for investing widely and intensely in women's leadership.

*'So here we are then, to engage in a two days' conversation, which we hope will be informative, enlightening and, transformative and revelatory'. Musimbi who invited the next speakers*

In her opening remarks, **Professor. Mindy Roseman**, Academic Director of The Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, challenged the audience by highlighting the pre-session negotiations over the political declaration on the anniversary of Beijing +20 which had not gone well with; Russia, Indonesia, the African group and the Holy See's constant effort towards limiting references to the human rights of women and girls. The same countries were calling for the deletion of references to the role of feminists groups in advancing gender equality and women's human rights. These attempts were designed to water down the language and strip away any meaningful commitments so that women are left with a declaration that says very little about the magnitude of the challenges that still exist in trying to

*If it is increasingly difficult to maintain feminist quality of doing in a world that differs profoundly, it is also increasingly necessary. - Prof. Roseman*

achieve gender equality and the full realization of women's human rights. She pointed out that the political declaration is less than what it might have been and challenged the audience by asking African women to use their collective power to engage their governments and ensure that the watered down statement would not be in the final version of the declaration.

**Margaret Hempel**, Director of Gender, Sexuality & Reproductive Justice, Ford Foundation, USA, shared the experiences of the Ford Foundation in grant making for women's political organizing. In her remarks, she underlined the need for exercising caution about isolating contentious issues such as sexuality especially the right to abortion from reproductive health as this would create artificial divides that limit women's voice and ability to self-determine. She also emphasized the importance of recognizing young people particularly young women as leaders in the present moment and not invisibilising them by reserving their leadership and social role as being that of the future.

*'There is need to look and listen for leadership sparks; embrace the leadership of young women today and not tomorrow. We need to develop eyes for new leadership and build on what we have', Margaret Hempel*

In the final opening remarks, boldly and robustly, Ndana Bofu-Tawamba, the Executive Director of Urgent Action Fund-Africa and chief convener of the meeting painted a vivid image of what the convening was about. She celebrated the feminist ancestors, those who resisted oppression and greatly inspired anti-colonialist movement rebellions, revolts, and revolutions, on whose shoulder 'we all stand', and acknowledged the revolutionary work of the leaders and pioneers of various social movements. *'We owe a debt of gratitude to them for leading the way and most importantly, never giving up the fight.'* she noted.

Referencing the African proverb *'if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together,'* she emphasized the importance of collective organizing towards transformation. Ndana reiterated that collective organizing and leadership are already evident in the way women are transforming their communities. The challenge however lies in building a greater political consciousness that enables transformation at local, national, regional and then global levels. The convening was set as a stage to remind, *'us that as women we are a vibrant, powerful force and warriors for women's rights. We are here to augment existing narratives and enhance the political consciousness that we are leaders today, yesterday and will continue to lead boldly in pursuit for peace, security, justice and prosperity for our countries.'* She went on to appeal to all participants to never give away the right to control the narrative and continue to engage in issues of human security, poverty alleviation, access to quality healthcare and education, equal participation in decision-making, as well as economic justice, all issues contained in the BPfA. She emphasized the importance of strengthening and building vertical and horizontal linkages across continents, countries, regions, sectors, locations and issues including movements, formal and informal institutions. *'This is the moment for rallying towards freedom, integrity, and conviction and for raising the feminist flag!'*, she concluded.

## EMERGING THEMES THAT WEAVED THE NARRATIVE

### Globalisation and Its Impact on Women on the African Continent

The participants, responding to different plenary session presentations, spent considerable time, to articulate and pause to deeply analyse the concept of globalisation and its meaning and impact on social and economic equality, human rights, democracy and participation. It was agreed that these topics have become subject to some of the most controversial debates and impassioned protests in the world today. Often referred to as the free flow of capital, the removal of trade barriers between states, and the accompanying technological, cultural and political transformations and exchanges have become some of the most significant influences on gender equality, globally. But women's experiences with globalization are extremely complex and diverse, both positive and negative. Just how one is affected by globalization depends on intersecting factors such as class, nationality, race, ability, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, age and education. There are some women who have significantly benefited from current global trends through better employment opportunities and autonomy, access to new technologies and increased purchasing power but this form about 1% of the population.

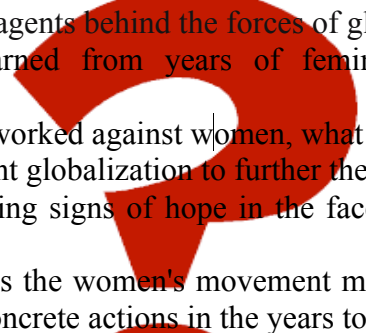
The participants argued that on the African continent, globalization processes have mostly meant greater insecurity, economic vulnerability, exploitation and hardship for many women. Cuts in social services, increased privatization and a flexible labour force are all inherent characteristics of globalization. Where governments have pulled back from spending in health and education, women have been forced to make up for the shortfall. As a result of public sector lay-offs, the expansion of export processing zones and the explosion of the informal sector, women disproportionately encounter low wages, poor working conditions and escalating risks. Many corporations exporting cash crops, pharmaceuticals or oil make huge profits at the expense of land rights, biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. The so-called 'communication revolution' has also raised issues of severe exclusion, further marginalizing women, especially in the Global South.

There is a concern that the global terrain has become much more uneven and unequal over the last couple of decades. Whatever positive global contributions can be attributed to globalization, the participants were adamant that those on the African continent have a very unique perspective on these global processes because of the ways in which they have cost the continent and African people and especially the women of Africa. Africa is not where it might have been envisaged to be 50 years ago.

In the US and in many countries, the domestic and foreign are separated and it is important to bring them together and recognize the ways in which one shapes the other. For African nations however, the domestic/foreign divide is increasingly fading. Conflict and instability incited and supported by external forces have become the norm as has increased funding from foreign nations especially for militarisation, which in turn influences the discourse. Given this situation, the meeting discussed that it is impossible for a nation to escape the global discourses or exist in isolation. However, it is essential to understand the intersecting power relations through race & ethnicity, class, nation and gender that occur in this globalised world and their resultant impact.



As the discussion regarding globalisation flowed forwards and backwards, a few questions were raised for further reflections:

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- Who are the human agents behind the forces of globalization?
  - What have we learned from years of feminist thinking and activism around globalization issues?
  - If globalisation has worked against women, what do we see as alternatives?
  - How can we re-invent globalization to further the rights of all women?
  - What are the emerging signs of hope in the face of the powerlessness generated by globalization?
  - And lastly, how does the women's movement move forward to ensure that our ideas are translated into concrete actions in the years to come?

With these many questions, asked in several ways, but pointing to the effects of globalisation, the atmosphere in the hall became intensely reflective, honest, quiet, but it was clear that there were no immediate answers.

### **Neo-liberalism: Impact of free markets on African nations**

The meeting discussed how neoliberalism as the supporting ideology of globalisation, inflates the social significance of the market and mystifies human relations. The participants were reminded that it is a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last 25 years or so, no matter how much social damage this causes. These economic policies of the free market (neo-liberalism) have brought about new global forces empowering the corporate and for-profit sector while divesting African states and removing their power to exercise sovereignty. Increased foreign investment and transnational corporate power has weakened the nation state and transformed the terrain at all levels at which citizens can demand accountability for their rights. The market prevails over states yet citizens fought for their states as the primary engine for development. The meeting heard how in West and East Africa, deepening disparity and marginalization are creating fertile ground for burgeoning fundamentalist movements, based on ethnicity, nationality or religion. Often, these movements have explicit agendas to undermine women's rights. Similarly, private companies are increasingly able to patent and profit from indigenous knowledge and life forms, thereby creating a whole new range of ecological, ethical and human rights challenges.

In group discussions, participants shared how in the diversity of their countries, has it become glaringly apparent and gravely concerning that the deregulation of trade, divestment of state and increasing privatisation of national economies as well as natural resources was being facilitated by governments that have been put into power by the same citizens they are stripping of any economic empowerment. The privatisation of land has led to massive land grabs in Africa and national industries and state functions are diminishing increasingly. The meeting unanimously agreed that with the notion that the impact of this neoliberal agenda is gendered.

## ***Extractive industry***

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi noted that this industry has grown exponentially on the continent. This growth has had both negative and positive impacts on nations and on women in particular. Tax collection, job creation, infrastructural development, market growth and Small to Medium Enterprises expansion are all positive elements of the growth of the extractive industry. However, there are numerous negative impacts including, grabbing of farming land, changes to livelihoods and dwindling access to natural resources which in turn affect access to water, food and firewood. On a gendered scale women become isolated and are often sidelined. The extractive industry is seen largely as men's work and only 5 to 10 % of people employed in the industry are women largely due to lack of skills and lack of access to readily accessible financing.

While debating ways of ensuring that women are not marginalized, some participants felt that education would lead to changes in women participation in the field and hence enabling them to take on more senior positions. Others however, argued that the local environmental debate regarding the extractive industry takes precedence over profits even if the profits are for women. Artisanal mining opportunities could not be more valuable than environmental preservation as the burst in extractive industry would lead to loss of land, shelter and degradation leading to water pollution. The impact of this degradation would impact women more as it might increase the walking distances for women to find safe water. It was stressed that even in the desire to engage meaningfully in economic spheres the cost of this to the broader population should be considered and that capitalist ideas of wealth accumulation for a few are not what the African feminist discourse is about.

The convening was reminded to fight the prevailing perception that African black people do not know what to do with their land and hence the insurgence of international 'investors' who come, grab land, and define development from extractive concepts without concern for the detrimental effects to indigenous people.

**Key question;** what is the role of women's rights organisations in ensuring that Africa's resource riches be translated into sustainable and inclusive growth? What immediate action is required to mitigate and manage long-term environmental impacts?

**Human security:** According to the 1994 Human Development Report, Human security is people-centred. It is concerned with how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities and whether they live in conflict or in peace<sup>2</sup>. In other words, human insecurity broadly conceived affects not just economic security but other areas of existence as well.

Human insecurity whether at the individual, group, or national levels is mostly a consequence of rapid socio-economic and political changes inherent in globalization and accompanied, in varying degrees, by a deepening of unequal power structures both at the local, national and international levels. The eruption of violent conflicts is, at times, an attempt to address human economic existential anxiety caused by globalization's destruction of the "social contract" between state and society resulting in loss of economic support systems. As globalization increases the level of prosperity among those who have power, it also increases poverty

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 1994: 24.

among those with less power. Ruth Ochieng of Isis Wicce asserted therefore that wars are profitable for some and continue to be supported by those who make profits from them. Wars and conflict have subsequently been normalised as the criminal economy continues to flourish through them. Research shows that a few African women make money in that undeclared economy however that does not make it acceptable nor can it be condoned for simply benefiting a few women and men while destroying entire nations. The main result of neo-liberalism has been the loss of livelihoods and impoverishment for the majority and wealth enrichment of a few.

This scenario raised some questions; in the mobilisation and advocacy work, women activists have, mostly, targeted the state, should this continue to be the case? How can African women, define viable economic, social and political frameworks that can guarantee gender equality, sustainable livelihoods and human rights for all?

The above questions invited the participants to stop and think. They were reminded that as activists, they can never stop thinking, reading and studying; reflection, silence, conversation, rebellion and provocation.

## **Militarism**

In the democracy, peace and security session the way that military power intersects and is related to economies and various religious fundamentalisms surfaced. It was noted that the issue of militarism is reduced to single stories and single approaches that erase the complexities of societies like Africa and are based on models that evidently have not worked. Professor Patricia Donli noted the existence of an unholy trinity, working together and reducing large regions of Africa to new levels of abjection and marginalization upon which these forces prey. They are predatory forces. Ridiculously high levels of extraction are continuing in the worst war zones. There is a clear 'resource curse'. The richest parts of Africa are the poorest and least supported which is no coincidence. None of these conflicts are accidental or tribal or actually an index of poverty. Instead they are an indicator of extreme oppressions and injustices and Africa's political underdevelopment sustained by the misfit between development recipes and projects and the realities of the different African nations. This misfit has resulted in cumulative problems with militarism being one of the main ones.

The meeting learnt that militarism is not just about war and conflict but a whole system that has ideology discourse that results in the wars and conflict. The wars and conflict are the tip of the iceberg. It underlies hidden parts where people accept as a given certain ways of doing things and one of the most pervasive is the acceptance of the use of violence to resolve conflict.

Militarism related statistics:

- 4 out of 10 displaced persons are in Africa
- \$4 billion/ day in spending worldwide

Professor Margo Okazawa-Rey argued that contrary to centralized ideas of peaceful women, African women's military involvement in postcolonial conflicts has dramatically increased between mid-20th and early 21st centuries. Data shows that there were Liberian women fighters making up between 20%-40% of the military. In Sierra Leone 25%-30% of fighters were women and children.

- US militarism = 50% of total world military expenditure, followed by Britain and China, 4% each
- 2012 budget = largest military spending in human history - \$1.3 trillion

Statistics of this nature demonstrate that there is abundance of global resources however these resources are directed to serve those who are already wealthy and towards sustaining war and conflict globally. Given the view of the U.S as a democracy and the failure to recognize the gendered impact of the wars they finance and support, the question raised earlier rings true of what African nations have been sold as democracy. Women are not just victims of war when they are on the bullet end of guns but also are the instruments of war holding the guns and ammunition that destroys lives of many on the continent.

**Empire of bases.** The dots on every continent in the world represent small installations to full blown military operations. Many are covert operations and most of them are not known to the US public.”



The meeting learnt that AfriCom is the US Africa command center and is part of a network of commands around the world. The dots on the map above are places all over the world where the US military is working. Whether consulting or providing humanitarian aid. Thinking about military peace keeping is kind of an oxymoron and the so-called UN military peace keepers are mainly in Africa, Middle East and in Haiti. The impact of militarism on the lives of women is devastating.

The participants constantly referred to the Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram, the cases of rape and violence in the DRC among numerous other heart-wrenching realities that have militarism written all over them.

It was agreed that putting an end to projectising peace building is vital. Resources cannot be pursued at any cost, even if African heads of state claim that such resources benefit their countries. The focus must remain on a single shared agenda, peace and democracy as it is envisioned by African women.

**The question remained;** what is the role of women in transforming the militarized world that currently exists? What analysis, tools and resources would be needed to engage this challenge?

### **Religious fundamentalisms and other –isms**

Militarism is not the only ism that is plaguing the lives of African women. Prof. Donli reiterated that religious fundamentalisms have arisen as a strong threat to women’s autonomy and security. Religious fundamentalisms have played a critical role in the orchestration of gross human rights abuses in Africa many of which have led to the deaths of countless numbers of people. Sexual minorities form part of the multitudes who have suffered the wrath of literal interpretations of religious texts. Bombs go off daily in the name of some religious teacher; women are raped and abused in the name of fulfilling the words and desires of a spiritual power. The greatest challenge with religious fundamentalism lies in how



strongly believers hold on to their belief leaving no room for questioning. This single track mind makes it extremely difficult to challenge the doctrines of the different religions. In this sphere women find themselves as the bearers of the heaviest load as their bodies continue to be the sites on which these struggles for salvation are fought.

**Key questions to ‘sit’ with included the following;** How can the women’s movement engage with religious fundamentalisms, understand what creates and fuels them as well as for what purpose? How can they strategise around them? The participants agreed that the work around fundamentalisms needed the efforts of all including religious leaders of various religions particularly Christian and Islamic on the African continent; how can the movement work with them? How can the movement engage with intelligent, ardent women who lead vital, active, and meaningful lives within religious institutions? Where are the entry points?

### **The cost of ‘development’; environmental awareness**

On the economic front, there were deep and critical discussions on the endless growth model which is based on the endless growth and endless profits even when the world is running out. Aggressive development being pursued is now decimating the environment. Development has been on the premise of peace and stability but in many countries, peace remains elusive. That is why development has to be consistently rethought.

### **Women and entrepreneurship**

During the entrepreneurship session, the focus was on private businesses and sector. The need to track the business women leaders’ trajectories and careers and really assess the extent to which they benefit other women especially the poor was underlined. Equally important was the need to ask women entrepreneurs to put money into the women’s movement and philanthropy. Their successes are meaningless to the movement if they are self-serving, capitalist and detrimental to other women. In celebrating the economic successes of women, there was a caution; the origins of their wealth must be questioned and whether it is legitimate. Women should be encouraged to put money back into their communities as a way of giving back.

**Key questions were put on the table:** Why do we constantly have to chase after money and foreign funders when there are wealthy women on the continent? What haven’t we done to help them understand our work? Why is it easier to approach wealthy men and women who are not on our continent than those on the continent?

### **Media and Communication**

The participants discussed at length what was problematic in the media, what alternatives they would like to see and how they believed this could be achieved.

The media space has had numerous challenges for women over the decades with the most frequent being the lack of representation of women in the media. These representations of women need to be challenged more and this requires women with a feminist analysis of some sort. The space for women in the media however is small with the majority being limited to working on what are perceived as ‘softer’ social issues.

The meeting paused to recognise and celebrate the women who have made a difference and managed to carve out space for themselves and other women. Sharing experiences of the limitations and challenges of being a woman in the media, Dr. Sylvia Blyden spoke of how difficult it is for women in mainstream media and how alternative spaces must be created

such as women's media houses. This, however, remains a challenge due to limited sources of financing to support such initiatives. It was clear however, to all that unless the images of women in the media shift and the language evolved, it will remain a challenge to raise public awareness that women have rights and deserve to be respected.

A lively debate took place relating to self-profiling and branding in the media by women activists, private sector leaders and women's organisations. The benefits and challenges of both were highlighted as one participant emphasised how chasing media attention and publicity could compromise security and also detract attention from the cause being fought for. On the other hand it was argued that publicity improved the support to women's organisations as visibility helped more funders and women in general to know about the work of the organisations. Perhaps there is a middle ground and balance that can be struck?

Social media and what it has enabled was discussed at length as well as the resultant security concern for women that emerge from social media.

**A few questions were put on the table for discussion and reflection;** how can women make the best use of social media given the challenges that exist for them in the mainstream media? How can media spaces be made safer? How do women brace themselves to seize opportune moments to advocate for their rights in the media? And finally in celebrating technological advances how can the women's movement remain conscious of the impact of rapidly evolving technology and environmental consciousness?

### **Women's leadership post Beijing**

There has been significant change since Beijing with more women entering into positions of power. This increase, however, needs to be supported by an improvement in the effectiveness of the women in power especially in making a positive improvement in the lives of other women. This effectiveness can be improved through increased support based on what the women leaders' needs are, in the process it must be ensured that they remain accountable to those who have put them in those spaces. An issue arising from the dialogue was that whenever women reach positions of power there is no communication from them while women leaders in the space cited the absence of communication from those below as a challenge they were experiencing. This disconnect needs to be addressed through bridging this communication gap so as to maximise the benefits of having more women in leadership positions.

As the conversation continued, it was noted that gains have been made but the state has become weaker such that the efforts towards increasing women in political leadership are undermined.

Dr. Jessie Kabwila, Malawi Member of Parliament, shared her experiences of feminist leadership in the political arena. Stating that pushing women into the political arena is not what is going to save women particularly given that the existing concept of democracy being used in Africa is a 'cut and paste' version that is not delivering to women. In so called democracies the spaces and voices of power cannot be found for women. Justice remains largely elusive and service delivery is only heard about. Given the realities in political spaces women's organising needs to be more strategic about where it wishes to place women and to what end. The struggle is not about tokenistic places at the table of power but rather fighting the misogynistic, patriarchal institutions for gender justice. African feminist ideologies must be injected into the mainstream and if curricula need to be developed to that end then so be it. She concluded by emphasising that principles are essential as they are what must remain when all is gone and that this is costly because when one contests power, it fights back.

Backlash is inevitable and harsh but awareness can help one prepare for it. Despite all this however she declared, ***'Let us not leave anything unquestioned and lets us not be intimidated'***.

It is imperative to hold states accountable for women and other marginalized groups. It is time to reconsider, be imaginative and think beyond existing structures because for all that has been done, the failures and limitations of those structures have become evident. This calls for new re-visioning.

**The presentation left the participants with some questions for mulling over.** Having worked hard to get women into positions of political leadership and discovering that this is not where the true power lies given the continual global shift then the question remains “If not the state, then what?” How then can women’s organising adapt to this shift in order to advance women’s rights work?

### **Resourcing women’s rights work**

As conversations about women as active and deliberate players in the economy have developed there is a big push to engage with corporations and the corporate sector and to develop more conscious wealth accumulation. Civil society has been challenged increasingly to try and tap some of the huge profits into civil society. This has created challenges on issues of values and principle. Coumba Toure had a burning question, ***'Do women’s organisations take dirty money in order to advance their cause'?*** Others argued that the money belongs to women to begin with and that the profits were built on the backs of African women therefore there was no shame in taking back what women were rightly entitled to. Opinions on the subject differed but this creative tension was allowed to exist.

The establishment of Women’s Funds particularly in Africa was celebrated as this enabled resources to be mobilized for the work that women on the continent feel is most urgent.

**Key question:** Is there such a thing as dirty or clean money?

### **Placing feminism on the table – deepening the analyses**

Building on the gains and facing new challenges is a double act the convening discussed. It is as important as recognizing and criticizing at the same time. Facing and naming our disappointments is necessary, even as we know that it could lead us into a state of paralysis. Not naming and facing our disappointment can cripple our sense of possibility.

With this understanding, global achievement of the women’s movement were celebrated particularly that there is the global policy consensus that gender must be addressed by all in one way or the other. The convening learnt about the gender poli-tricks which have been reducing feminism to little projects. The strategies used by the women’s movement have been accepted in small potions as little recipes that instead of becoming a platform for social change are used to fragment a deep understanding of the broad context creating the problem. NGOs have become the silos that host and support this fragmentation and as long as they are relied on as the medium for transformation there can be no meaningful social change. A coming together of state and civil society is essential and this requires a strong feminist underpinning to create, implement and sustain feminist policies. Different levels of the power structures are disabled from talking to one another and it is essential to join the dots. Spaces such as this convening are designed for the very purpose of connecting the dots and must be

created more frequently and the outcomes of such spaces must be shared and built on towards sustainable change.

In deepening the feminist analysis there is a need for resourcing the work and this requires stronger and collective negotiations with funders to enable transitioning from little project to focusing on the systemic agenda. The last 20 years have shown that just dealing with symptoms will not lead to the desired outcomes and it is critical to cut deeper and understand the power and economic structures and geo politics that are still working against the interests of women particularly African women.

## **Conclusion**

Harvard provided the space where many voices were woven into a composition of connected thinking and ideas, where an implicit picture of the women's leadership continued to emerge. It gave form and meaning to people's views, ideas, thoughts and contributions. The convening stimulated thinking, understanding, and envisioning a future possibility through the power of collective thinking; through the recognition that who and how we are now creates our future. We saw a movement from Beijing, and what it promised and then moved from what was achieved or not achieved during the course of the past 15 years and moved to future possibilities (Post 2015 Development Agenda).

And so, the convening came to an end but not the conversation and the fierce determination to ensure women's rights on the African continent. How were the participants going to leave this extraordinary, provocative, connecting, intellectual and enriching space and return home? Did the convening shift anything? What were the participants to take into the future as they returned home? Some of the below responses give an idea of the mood of the participants as they gathered the energy to go back home.



- *Motivation and renewed energy knowing that all my sisters are demanding change.*
- *A clearer picture of the nature of the women's rights work and my place in relation to it.*
- *I feel as if I have acquired new reading glasses. I can see clearly, doubts are gone.*
- *I am going back to my organisation determined more than ever, to remain on the cutting edge of women's issues in the current debate.*
- *It was nice to see people that we normally do not interact with, they might think differently but that's what we want. To know how the others think.*
- *In these two days, I experienced an Aha! moment that I need to share with my fellow activists when I return home.*
- *I have gathered enough materials for writing on feminist and transformative leadership, gender justice and development think pieces.*
- *Harvard expanded the space for learning and debate and how to do it in a new way and with a cross section of people to create more possibilities.*
- *Africa has serious thinkers of all ages scattered around the globe, inspiring and generating new feminist knowledge and insights. This was a powerful meeting!*
- *A new and great enrichment increased by the quality of people in the convening.*
- *My work, practices, thinking and madness have been seeded and watered.*
- *The women of the continent spoke; they shared their convictions, passions, deepest held urges and desires, unavoidable, undeniable, and inexplicable. They presented, deliberated, debated, reflected, questioned, laughed and cried-a lot. I take that home with me.*

## **Annexes**

- 1. Participants List**
- 2. Presentations**