



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Women's Activism for Gender Equity in Africa -
Joint Special Issue with WAGADU: A Journal of
Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*

Article 1

Oct-2008

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Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Lisa and Ndinda, Catherine (2008). Introduction: Women's Activism for Gender Equity in Africa. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(1), 1-4.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss1/1>

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Women's Activism for Gender Equity in Africa

By Lisa Bernstein¹ and Catherine Ndinda²

This special joint issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) and [WAGADU](#) focuses on women's activism and women's movements in different countries and cultures throughout Africa and the African Diaspora. The project represents a collaboration between two online, open-access journals that address gender and women's issues within a transnational and cross-cultural context. The essays, which are distributed between the two journals, use interdisciplinary feminist and activist approaches to reveal the different forms of personal and communal actions being undertaken by African women today in cultural, social, economic, and political arenas. In showing the diversity of African women's activism; the underlying issues around which activism develops; and the impact of women's activism on individuals, communities, and nations, this dual project has relevance for women and men throughout the world.

As the Nobel Prize is being awarded for the discovery of the AIDS virus, and the United Nations Security Council has unanimously adopted a resolution calling to end sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones,³ women in many African countries continue to face the most severe and urgent consequences of these assaults on humanity. Last year, a survey conducted by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) emphasized the vulnerable situation of women across the continent and criticized African governments' insufficient implementation of policies that support gender equality and women's human rights:

African women represent the largest demographic segment affected by HIV and AIDS, constituting 58 per cent of the 25 million Africans infected by the disease. In addition, while they are the backbone of the informal economy, especially in the agricultural sector, African women

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³ The resolution was adopted on June 19, 2008, at a ministerial-level meeting on "women, peace and security." At this meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked that "sexual violence profoundly affects not only the health and safety of women, but the economic and social stability of their nations"; meanwhile, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon advocated increasing women's role in post-conflict resolution and nation re-building, stating: "We must do far more to involve women in conflict prevention, peace negotiations and recovery after the guns fall silent." United Nations Security Council Department of Public Information. "Security Council Demands Immediate and Complete Halt to Acts of Sexual Violence Against Civilians in Conflict Zones, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1820." New York, 19 June 2008. 8 Oct 2008 <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9364.doc.htm>>

lack access to productive resources, including credit, land, and technical and support services.⁴

Engaging such wide-ranging critical, systemic issues, the writers in this volume turn their attention to the women themselves as individual and collective agents of self-empowerment and social transformation. Moving women and gender to the center of global cultural, political, and economic issues, this edition of *JWS* explores women's activist roles while expanding traditional concepts of activism and drawing connections among diverse ideologies and institutions: the judicial system and societal mores (Onyejekwe); the AIDS epidemic and girls' primary education (Kakuru); historical religious persecution and current political and economic control (Federici); and environmental justice and international intergovernmental organizations (Braun).

In "Nigeria: Beyond the Dominance of Rape," Chineze Onyejekwe takes up the issue of gender-based sexual violence by highlighting the challenges that rape survivors in Nigeria face in breaking codes of silence, speaking out about their experiences, and overcoming institutional and societal barriers to demand justice. The author highlights the complex legal environment that survivors have to negotiate and illustrates how the patriarchal institutions perpetuate the silence amongst rape survivors. Women in the North, where *sharia* is the dominant legal system, are forced into silence because reporting the crime may not result in justice, but rather in their very own execution.

In the South, where common law exists alongside customary law, women are faced with glaring contradictions between the judicial and societal responses to women who have been raped. Whereas a rape survivor may get justice by reporting to the courts, social norms that regard rape survivors as a disgrace to their families may deter reporting of the crime. Rape survivors are caught within these contradictions and suffer a second victimization by the very communities and systems that are meant to protect them. Onyejekwe clearly shows the "loud silence" surrounding rape and rape survivors. Yet, as she also demonstrates, women have refused to remain silent and have formed a number of organizations to address the widespread sexual violence against women. As a result of these organizations' action-oriented initiatives, women's lives have been saved and dignity is being restored to rape survivors.

Another crucial area in which women have been stigmatized and silenced is the global AIDS crisis and its ravaging effects throughout the African continent. In her article, "HIV/AIDS Impact on Rural Livelihoods and the Struggle for Gender Equality in Primary Education in Uganda," Doris Kakuru addresses a neglected aspect of this most topical issue by showing how the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Uganda is reversing the gains made by girls in accessing primary school education. She argues that, while officially there is gender equality in access to primary school education, the household and community circumstances that demand the involvement of women whenever there is a burial impact negatively in the ability of girls to gainfully stay at school. By comparing the tasks required of girls in the household with those required of boys, Kakuru demonstrates how girls are systematically disadvantaged, both at the household and

⁴ "UN-backed Forum Focuses on Development Needs of Africa's Women." *Women's News Network*. 29 Sept 2008. 8 Oct 2008 <<http://www.womensnet.org.za/news/un-backed-forum-focuses-development-needs-africa%E2%80%99s-women>>

community levels. It is thus not surprising that the attrition level of girls in primary school education is high.

The situation of access and retention of girls in primary school in Uganda, like elsewhere in Africa, is made more complex by intervening factors such as HIV/AIDS, which is shown to impact greatly on girls in the affected households as well as those in the larger community. Worse is the unsympathetic attitude of educators who behave in ways oblivious to the plight of children from households affected by HIV/AIDS. Drawing from women's activism in Uganda and how this has brought about equality in access to education, Kakuru argues that there is need for a greater level of activism if the retention levels of girls are to improve at the primary school level, in the context of HIV/AIDS.

While feminists have been vocal in their activism around issues of violence, HIV/AIDS, education, and development, few have dared to venture into the terrain of witch-hunting, a phenomenon that has been known to exist in African communities for decades and, as Silvia Federici explains in, "Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today," remains prevalent in many contemporary African societies. While showing that the phenomenon is not unique to Africa but indeed has similarities in Europe, Federici attributes the increasing cases of witch-hunting to economic causes -- unemployed youth who see elderly women as a liability and competition for scarce resources. Media reports of witch-hunting, inadvertently perhaps, show the horror of the act while also giving justification for the murder of witches. Ironically, few men have faced the same wrath, despite common knowledge that wizards also exist in African societies. In arguing that the reasons for the mass murder of elderly women in the name of witch-hunting are economic and political, rather than representing presumed occult practices, Federici reveals the class and gender implications of this recent wave of violence. Her paper highlights the importance and urgency of African women rallying together to bring an end to such gendered human rights violations.

In contrast to conventional studies of social movements that focus on formal institutions and organized struggle, Yvonne Braun, in her paper, "How Can I Stay Silent?": One Woman's Struggles for Environmental Justice in Lesotho," uses one woman's challenge the World Bank funded Lesotho Highlands Water Project as a way of redefining our understanding of activism. Braun critiques the way in which Western definitions of activism have tended to exclude its manifestations in Africa, where women's daily struggles often embody activist principles. While most discussions of resistance and political transformation, including those in this journal issue, center around organized group activities, Braun's article focuses on a rural Basotho woman, Refiloe Kolisang, whose struggle for environmental justice for her community, displaced by the Lesotho Highlands multi-dam scheme, challenges preconceived notions of personal and political, local and global, resistance.

In Refiloe's narrative, we see how an ordinary village woman uses every available opportunity to speak out about the environmental injustice wrought upon her people. Despite the failure to resist resettlement by the government, Refiloe has refused to remain silent. Refiloe subverts the forums convened by the powerful to state the case for her community. She writes in her native Sesotho, makes public presentations, and seeks out trusted individuals to translate her written submissions. Whether the concerns of her community will be addressed is uncertain, but rural Basotho women like Refiloe

have refused to be muted by powerful transnational forces involved in the Lesotho Highlands multi-dam project and are at the forefront in negotiating a changed landscape and lead the struggle to organize people against global environmental injustice.

Although the papers in this volume take diverse approaches to women's activism and portray a range of geographic, historical, and political contexts, they share a common focus on presenting topics and concerns that have led to women's speaking out, organizing, and resisting, as well as calling attention to areas in which such actions are still needed. In reframing the forms and strategies that activism may take, and in revealing the relationships among previously disconnected cultural, socio-economic, and political issues, the women in these essays open up new spaces not only for themselves but for all women both to become active subjects of their own lives and communities, and to initiate change on a national and international level.