

CONCEPT NOTE

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2017

TOPIC: WOMAN ACTIVISM IN AFRICA;

Is Feminism Divisive, unAfrican and anti-Black? Debunking the Myth

Within the African continent, the history of black women's activism and resistance is often relayed through the lens of slavery, colonialism and/or apartheid. During the struggle for national liberation on the continent, women's issues were often dismissed and deferred, as it was assumed there were other, more pressing issues such as race and national sovereignty that must be pursued. As a result, women activists had to wage various forms of struggles and resistance alongside their male counterparts within the nationalist movements. It was these forms of resistance that helped shape new constitutions in most post-colonial states, as women carried the debate forward although in varying degrees as some countries were not as receptive to women's issues as others.

In South Africa, the transitional period towards independence ushered in a highly progressive constitution that has been hailed as the best (at least on paper) in terms of gender equality on the continent - if not globally. However, it was during this same period that women's collective nationalist activism degenerated as it was assumed that the newly reformed policies and legislations would improve living conditions for women as a favourable, seemingly pro-woman government was put in place. The collective activism such as the one witnessed during the 1956 Women's March, and in the trade unions was gradually lost. Black women had faith in the newly formed government led by their fellow black men. This is despite evidence showing elsewhere that postcolonial states tend to neglect the needs of its most vulnerable citizens, and women are always at the receiving end. It was further hoped that the favourable policies will translate into improved living conditions for black women who happened to be at bottom rung of the ladder of human ontology.

However, two decades after independence we have witnessed public outrage, protests and resistance by women. The black radical feminist movement has thus far made salient the pertinence of an intersectional analysis to this struggle because disabled, queer and lesbian women continue to experience violence, marginalisation, oppression and exploitation as displayed in the struggle for decolonisation. Female students within the #Fallist movements at universities exposed various social ills such as police brutality, misogyny and rape. They could no longer take it. In one incident, female students at Wits stripped their tops and marched bare breasted alongside their male counterparts and the riot police that inhabited their campus.

These acts of resistance unveiled new struggles and resuscitated women's collective action which was gradually fading in South Africa. The Wits topless demonstration, recreated and influenced by Nigerian women's form of protest against colonial administration, opened up new debate about acceptable/unacceptable forms of resistance by black women. Misogynistic voices in the public and journalistic discourse condemned these acts. What this public debate and attacks failed to unmask was the inherent and invisible patriarchal/misogynistic/sexist/ tendencies and behaviours embedded within the black radical movement.

Instead, women were blamed, ridiculed, and physically attacked for voicing out their concerns. Much of the debate centred on feminism as divisive, "unAfrican" and 'uncultural'. It was argued that the black women's struggle is externally generated and it was not surprising how some black male students responded to these perceived crises. The fewer voices of black/queer/disabled feminists were often dismissed and silenced by the dominant voices of black anti-feminists within the public space but there was evident resistance against such.

In essence, the #Fallist movement has highlighted the level of distrust which continue to exist amongst men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, able-bodied and disabled. These movements shed some light on post-apartheid South Africa's failure to protect women, specifically black women, from the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, classism and homophobia. Within these black radical movements, black feminists are portrayed as subjects of ridicule in the struggle for further decolonisation.

This is done in an attempt to discredit black women for standing up against degrading stereotypes and shame perpetuated by those who continue to dehumanise and brutalise them within a system that masquerades as progressive and egalitarian. This is certainly not a new struggle as historically the struggle for national liberation has always concealed gender issues in very interesting ways. Women's issues were in most cases perceived as petty and were therefore peripheralised, debased and derailed.

Feminism, regardless of its contribution towards building equality for women and men, has largely received scorn from individuals who are antifeminist saying that it is divisive while many voices echo the idea that feminism is a tool of white supremacists and/or "unAfrican". There are widespread notions that black feminists act as agents against black unity, progress and the revolution. As highlighted earlier, these attitudes towards feminism were/are also notable in the #Fallists movement wherein feminists who confronted misogynistic behaviours and practices by males in the movement incurred negative labels.

Media platforms such as online social media highlighted this. One post reads "It's about time we acknowledge that Whites out-played us with all this stupid doctrines and feminism to be precise! I just can't stand a black feminist!" Another wrote "Feminism is the final weapon to killing and diminishing the black race from existence". Many people, particularly men, blame feminism for the "destruction of black families" while some black women have outrightly said that feminism is a colonial project.

These sentiments and fears against feminism do not only play out in South Africa but also in some of the most developed countries that continues to experience widespread racism. For instance, during the recent American Women's March which has been acclaimed as the biggest women's march in the US history, anti-feminists sentiments were also heard. One man commented on Jay Symopoulos's online article in the Activist Post about the march. He said "Judging by the reactions of the male half of society, this unfocused, embarrassing pussy demonstration was every bit as divisive as Black Lives Matter. Black/white, left/right, male/female/gender confused... when will the lemmings understand they are being pitted against each other to insure we never unite as one voice?"

It is against this background that the 2017 International Women's day celebration seeks to interrogate the different narratives and thoughts about black feminism. This will help steer debate and advance struggle for black women. Is feminism/black feminism a divisive tool used by White supremacists? Why are feminists feared within the black struggle against white supremacy, and what can we learn from this? What role should feminists play within the black radical movements? What forms of resistance should they consider? How should black feminists maintain a balance, if any, in their fight against multiple oppressions without compromising the struggle against white supremacy which continues to be an integral part of the post-apartheid state?

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean author, filmmaker, playwright, poet and activist, she will deliver the keynote speaker and participate in an intergenerational panel discussion that will reflect on and debate Woman Activism in Africa, asking the difficult question of whether Feminism is Divisive, unAfrican and anti-Black?