Challenging Structural Inequalities:

The Vision of Feminist Transformative Leadership

By Mary Wandia

The past 15 years have seen an increase in women's participation at the highest levels of decision-making in Africa. However, a deeper analysis of electoral and government structures reveals inherent barriers to transformative leadership. Women's representation in politics has hardly resulted in meaningful changes in African people's lives and welfare. It is time for leadership that focuses not only on expanding access, but also on changing the formal and informal rules and norms at the heart of discrimination against and the exclusion of a majority of African people. Women constitute more that half of the population on the continent, but they remain oppressed and exploited. Unless we address the violation of their rights, our continent will not achieve sustainable development, equality, and peace.

What kind of leadership can help us to end structural inequalities and realise the full potential of all African people? This paper posits that unless we envision leadership that will address the inequalities that are embedded in our social, religious, political and economic structures – structures that thrive on the exploitation and oppression of Africans – the status quo will continue. It is time for us to uphold leadership styles that are liberating and empowering. This article seeks to explore the key tenets of the feminist transformative leadership model and its power to challenge structural inequalities.

Leadership in Africa and its impact on African women's rights

The status of women is a good indicator of the wellbeing of an entire society. In assessing the effectiveness of the current leadership in Africa, I will briefly look at the status of women in Africa. This is timely, given that 2010 is a significant year in the women's rights calendar. It marks the fifteenth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the fifth anniversary of the African Union's Pro-tocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. This year will also see the launch of the African Women's Decade (2010–20). Many African countries will also mark five decades of independence. It is an opportune time to reflect on leadership on our continent and its implications for the next decade, using a feminist lens.

Africa's leadership is characterised by high levels of human insecurity and underdevelopment, 'stayism', the entrenched dominance of the liberation-movement-turned-governing-party, a return of the military, the personification of political power, the distribution of spoils and profits among a patronage network, state capture, and unresolved intra- and inter-state conflicts (Van Wyk 2007: 30).

All the leadership models that are currently functioning on the continent do so within a framework of patriarchy, patrimony, and the 'old boys club' network. Women's voices are generally absent from the corridors and halls of power where important decisions that affect their lives are taken – be it in national assemblies or within the African Union. This is so despite the fact that women constitute over half of the total population in Africa. Under the aegis of patriarchal gender ideology, women learn that their space is in the private domain, while men are taught to take their place in the public realm through cultural instruction, socialisation, religion, law, and policy (Tamale undated: 7).

Africa has made strides in various areas critical to the advancement of women. This has resulted from feminist struggles, creativity, and persistence. We now have legal and policy frameworks on women's rights and gender equality at national and regional level. However, these frameworks have not been translated into tangible gains to transform the lives of women. There is a lack of political will to dedicate resources to the implementation mechanisms, processes and services that would assist women to enjoy all their human rights.

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Women are changing the political landscape. Africa now has its first female head of state, Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the President of Liberia. In 2004, Luisa Dias Diogo became Mozambique's first woman prime minister, and, in 2005, Phumzile Mlambo-Ncguka was appointed South Africa's first female deputy president. Marie-Angelique Savane was the chairperson of the APRM between 2003 and 2005, and, in 2004, Gertrude Mongella was elected the first speaker of the Pan-African Parliament. Furthermore, half of the ten members of the African Union Commission are women (Ebeku 2006). Women's representation in national parliaments has increased in a majority of African countries. Africa has the highest reported rate of progress in the world (10 percent) on this target for the period 1990–2007. But the story is not altogether cheerful. Africa still faces a stiff challenge to reach the 50/50 gender parity target set by the African Union (AU) in its Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (UNECA 2009).

Some questions linger on, and we need to answer them in order to develop new and effective forms of leadership. Has our push for an increase in the number of women entering politics, together with the legal and policy frameworks, shifted our eyes from the transformative goal of challenging and dismantling the patriarchal oppression and exploitation that prevents women from enjoying their rights? Have we changed the rules in the political arena or played by the existing ones? We have fallen short because the current leadership remains unchallenged. The failure is depicted clearly by the continued discrimination and exclusion suffered by African women.

More than 50 years after attaining independence, African women are dying while giving life. Half a million women die from preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Half of all maternal deaths globally (265, 000) occur in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations 2009: 27). The proportion of women infected by HIV is high and increasing. Women constitute 61 percent of infected people in all African sub-regions except North Africa. In almost every country in the continent, prevalence rates are higher among women than men. The vulnerability of African women and girls to HIV infection is integrally linked to underlying gender inequalities, societal norms and discrimination (African Union & UNECA 2008: 15). Ending violence against women and the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights have remained the most elusive and contested frontiers of women's rights. The fact that women's bodily integrity and autonomy are not acknowledged and respected remains a stark reminder that we have not dismantled patriarchy.

Violence against women and girls remains one of the most widespread violations of human rights on our continent. Violence, or the threat of it, not only causes physical and psychological harm to women and girls, but also limits their access to and participation in society because the fear of violence circumscribes their freedom of movement (and of expression) as well as their rights to privacy, security and health.

Women constitute the majority of displaced people and refugees in conflict situations. Although African women are disproportionately affected by conflict compared to men, their voices in conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and transitional justice and peace-building processes are only faintly listened to, often leaving them at the margins of peace processes.

Several governments have adopted or are in the process of adopting discriminatory legislation reversing fundamental women's rights including, but not limited to, the criminalisation of HIV, indecent dressing laws and anti-homosexuality bills.

This continues to happen because leaders are concerned with establishing or restoring their power, influence, and control over others. Closely related to the need for power are the various forms of violence and/or corruption that often accompany it (Van Wyk 2007: 15–16). Instead of addressing the 'real crises', leaders are enacting laws that curtail citizens, civil society and media freedoms, adopting and implementing discriminatory laws and discriminating against and attacking sexual minorities, which individually and collectively affect the advancement of women's rights in Africa.

In addition, threats to the lives of human rights defenders and infringements of freedoms of association that impact the promotion, realisation and enjoyment of human rights and women's rights are on the rise. Cultural and religious fundamentalism and intolerance are also growing and largely go unchallenged. Several governments have adopted or are in the process of adopting discriminatory legislation reversing fundamental women's rights including, but not limited to, the criminalisation of HIV, indecent dressing laws and anti-homosexuality bills. These bills violate various rights: the right to privacy and confidentiality, the right to sexual integrity and autonomy, the right to bodily integrity, freedom from discrimination, the right to health, the right to equal protection before

the law, freedom of association, sexual and reproductive rights, freedom of choice, and the right to life, among others.

Leadership styles on the continent are informed by patriarchy and therefore seek to exercise power and authority over others, thereby institutionalising discrimination and the violation of fundamental human rights, particularly women's human rights. What we need is transformative leadership – leadership that raises the level of human conduct and the ethical aspirations of both leaders and the led, and thus has a transforming effect on both. Such leadership occurs when one person or more engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality (Burns 1978).

In the years preceding independence and the decades after the colonial experience, African women became freedom fighters and joined liberation movements. Since independence, patriarchal structures and systems have failed to acknowledge women's role in liberating the continent and the need to accord them equal status and treatment with their male counterparts. As McFadden points out (in this issue and elsewhere), women have been an important and increasingly visible part of African political life. They made fundamental changes to the body politic of Africa in significant ways. African women have nothing to lose by envisioning and crafting a new future, and we have every reason to want something different for our continent (McFadden undated).

To move towards fundamental change, we need leaders with a different kind of vision and commitment. These leaders must demonstrate a strong commitment to the principles of equality and empowerment, particularly gender equality and women's empowerment. They need to be committed to use power not as an instrument of domination and exclusion, but as an instrument of liberation, inclusion and equality (Jahan 2000). It behoves us to craft new leadership styles that are responsive to the needs of all African people.

Challenging structural inequalities: Re-crafting and re-conceptualising leadership from a feminist perspective

The patriarchal constructions of leadership as exercising power and authority over others, the idea of the 'leader' and the 'led', have all contributed greatly to the exclu-

sionary, exploitative and discriminatory practices that have been institutionalised over the years at all levels of our societies (Mukasa undated: 6-7).

Structural inequalities in our society are mainly due to patriarchy – a system of male authority that legitimises the oppression and exploitation of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious, and military institutions and policies. Patriarchy is inter-related with and informs relationships of class, ethnic, religious and global imperialism (African Feminist Forum undated: 5).

Since the causes of women's inferior status and unequal gender relations are deeply rooted in history, religion, and culture, in the psychology of the self, in laws and legal systems, and in political institutions and social attitudes, if the status and material conditions of women's lives are to change at all the solutions must penetrate just as deeply (Batliwala 1994: 130). Patriarchal oppression and the structures that sustain inequalities in society require that women's movements be part and parcel of the greater democratisation of society, and that women have a distinct mission of articulating women's rights and gender equality (Nassali 2009: 60-61).

Feminism is the social and political struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression. It challenges the status quo by seeking equality between men and women. Feminism questions the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and develops tools for transformatory analysis and action. Based on transformative leadership principles, feminists have crafted an alternative form of leadership – feminist transformative leadership. However, 'transformational feminist leadership' is not 'women's leadership'. Womanhood is not synonymous with being feminist; indeed, some female leaders have done more to consolidate sexist undemocratic leaderships than certain men (Tamale undated: 11).

Who is a transformative leader? A transformative leader, simply defined, is a person who can guide, direct, and influence others to bring about a fundamental change, change not only of the external world, but also of internal processes (Jahan 2000). Feminist transformative leadership is a process of changing structures, processes and systems to guarantee social justice, equality, and equitable distribution of resources. It seeks to radically alter the existing power imbalances that permeate each of our social, economic and political institutions (UNIFEM/ AMWA 2003).

TABLE 1: QUALITIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

A. Vision and Commitment	B. Institutional Behaviour
• Equality	• Participatory
• Equity	• Egalitarian
• Empowerment	• Responsive
• Human rights	• Transparent
• Peace	• Accountable
• Sustainability	• Non-corrupt
• Shared power, responsibility, well-being	• Consensus-oriented
	• Empowering

Source: Jahan 2000

Feminist transformative leadership is the key to challenging structural inequalities. The United Nations recognised this in 1995 when it stated in the Bejing Platform for Action that "without the active participation of women and incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved."

Feminist transformative leadership is critical in challenging structural inequality because it is informed by the power of the feminist lens, which enables the feminist leader to identify injustices and oppression and provide inspiration to facilitate the development of more inclusive, holistic communities (Barton 2006).

Feminist transformative leadership is about social justice, about advocating for women and others who are marginalised, and about attending to injustices. A feminist leader possesses a core set of values, or a feminist ethic. A feminist leader is always attuned to issues of fairness and is always deconstructing surroundings to identify oppressions. A feminist leader is always focused on a broad social justice agenda (AWL 2006).

Feminist transformative leadership includes distinct principles that are critical in transforming structural inequalities.

- It builds relationships and alliances that promote change in oneself and others.
- It has an inclusive orientation that actively seeks to create structures in which leadership is accountable, promotes the equal participation of all stakeholders, respects diversity, and seeks to build consensus.
- It is premised on the notion that all have an equal right to participate in the processes that shape their lives and values, and values each one as a critical contributor to those processes.
- It respects, promotes and observes the principles of

sustainable development, human rights and responsibility, and rejects notions of privilege and patronage.

- Leadership is seen as a service in which the principal objective must be to build communities by investing in people and responding to their needs (UNIFEM/AMWA 2003).
- It involves not only change in effect but also in the process, values and institutions. It involves change in attitudes and mindset of the players, change in the conceptualisation, formulation and delivery of policies, and change in the composition and input of the players in the process. Transformation is underpinned by change (Thoko & Macauley undated).
- It focuses on both individual or micro-level and societal or macro-level social justice concerns. It manifests a desire to bring marginalised voices to the centre of the conversation, and a willingness to take risks as one strives to enact a transformative agenda (Barton 2006).
- It seeks to achieve the following goals: liberty, justice, equality and collective wellbeing.
- It is driven by the values of honesty, responsibility, fairness and honouring one's commitments.

TABLE 2: THE FEMINIST VISION OF TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS

Traditional Politics	Transformative Politics
A. Values	**A. Values**
Power as domination	Power as liberation
Win/Loss	Win/Win
Conflict and war	Peace and co-existence
Authoritative control	Stewardship and service
Homogeneity	Diversity
B. Processes	**B. Processes**
Top down	Participatory
Secretive	Transparent
Corrupt	Clean
Burdensome	Empowering
Selective	Inclusive
C. Institutions	**C. Institutions**
Hierarchical	Egalitarian
Autocratic	Accountable
Bureaucratic	Responsive

Source: Jahan 2000

This model is critical in transforming social inequalities as it will equip leaders with tools that will enable them to:

- set clear goals;
- enhance people's awareness of their rights and build their capacity to demand and protect them;
- create new identities for women by asserting their personhood – giving women an identity, recognising women as persons in their own right;
- question and challenge ourselves – making the personal political;
- question and challenge the status quo – dismantling the private/public dichotomy and bringing issues in the private sphere to the public sphere for the purpose of addressing them;
- respect the diversity and human rights of all regardless of their status, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc;
- assert women's autonomy and bodily integrity – giving women choice and freedom over their bodies;
- acquire and build feminist knowledge and understanding of patriarchy and how it works;
- affirm women's knowledge and valorise it – appreciating women's expertise, contributions, experiences;
- create and nurture safe spaces for expression, participation, and growth of feminist leadership skills and mentoring for the young generation;
- prioritise self-care – taking care of women's mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing;
- act in solidarity with those who are oppressed and exploited;
- build and strengthen feminist movements and institutions; and,
- create alliances with strategic groups to advance equality, development and peace (adapted from UNIFEM/AMWA 2003).

Feminist transformative leadership envisages several outcomes critical for equality and sustainable development, namely:

- peace, sustainability, development, social justice, and dignity for all people, through being value-based and inclusive of people's needs, especially the needs of marginalised groups;
- linkages between perceived abstract concepts such as accountability, gender equality, transparency, good governance, and basic development needs such as food, shelter, health, education, and human security;

- informed choices, knowledge, and equitable distribution of resources leading to a better quality of life for all to flourish as productive citizens;
- personal and institutional learning, empowerment, and transformation; and,
- equal opportunities and privileges for women and men (adapted from UNIFEM/ AMWA 2003).

Conclusion

As African citizens, we can no longer afford to watch as our continent suffers under bad leadership. We have to transform leadership to ensure peace, equality, and development on our continent. We have to move beyond focusing on occupying political positions to promote leadership that will ensure gender equality and empowerment of all, that critically engages with the patriarchal structures, which are responsible for the oppression and exploitation of women; we need feminist transformative leadership.

It is time to move from theory to apply the principles of transformative leadership as individuals, institutions, and movements. In addition to that, we need to study and document our experiences. This is critical in building feminist knowledge and practice and up-scaling good practices. As we seek to transform our continent, we should be under no illusions. Transforming our society is not an easy mission. It is risky and results will be realised gradually. It will depend on our commitment, as it will require sacrifice, persistence, and dedication. Those who dominate us and benefit from the current status quo will fight back viciously. They will use strategies that we know only too well: diversion, denial, threats, coercion, intimidation, dilution, violence, and isolation. They will try to co-opt us or appropriate our struggles and achievements and pay lip-service to our demands. But we should persist and never lose sight of our goal – to change the rules and not to play by them. Only then can we realise prosperity for all on our continent.

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