

## Looking Back, Moving Forward: Reflections on Forum '85

The street is now called Harry Thuku Road. It separates the cells of what is now the Nairobi Central Police Station from the grounds of the University of Nairobi (UoN). Nothing tangible indicates that this space, shielded by a row of buildings from the UoN Great Court, venue for the 1985 United Nations Women's Decade NGO Forum, is the site of one of the most significant events in Kenyan history. Indeed, few who attended that event were even aware that just a stone's throw from their gathering, over sixty years before, one woman had given her life demonstrating what they were deliberating: the struggle for human rights, and women's full participation in every aspect of life.

On 16 March 1922, Mary Nyanjiru Muthoni joined other protesters gathering outside the colonial jail to demand the release of Harry Thuku, the charismatic leader of the East African Association, the articulate spokesperson of the emerging African nationalist movement. The colonial authorities had arrested Thuku a day earlier, hoping to stem the momentum of growing African protest against racial injustices. In response, thousands of urban workers brought Nairobi to a standstill as they camped at the gates of what was then Kingsway Police Station. After a long, tense standoff, it appeared that the authorities would successfully disperse the crowd when Muthoni Nyanjiru made a dramatic intervention. To the ululated affirmation of other women, she strategically deployed her female body, and challenged those who had begun to retreat. Her success in re-mobilising the crowd was met with a brutal response: police and settler fire killed as many as 150 people. Nyanjiru was among the first to fall. Yet to this day, there is still no official state recognition of her brave act on this or any other site, not even across the street, where buildings are named for those others whose lives the university has chosen to celebrate.

For several days in July 1985, I joined that other crowd of thousands gathering on the campus lawns for the NGO Women's Forum. I was only a schoolgirl at the time, present at the Forum as part of the teams

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entertaining the delegates. My strongest impression remains the constant sense of awe that accompanied every visit we made to the Forum. I was astonished at the numbers and the amazing array of accomplishments recounted by women from all over the world. Most of all, however, I was stunned that so many of these remarkable women were African, and of those the majority were my compatriots. A Kenyan girl-child myself, I had grown up with few stories of local women as heroes; my world circumscribed by official narratives that relegated women to the footnotes of history. Muthoni Nyanjiru was merely a name added in appendices to narratives of Harry Thuku's achievements; Me Ketilili, just an afterthought following the stories of the illustrious sons of the nation. As for others like Moraa wa Ngiti and General Muthoni, I would not even hear of them until years later when my own curiosity sent me on a search for Kenyan her-story.

For the occasion of Forum '85, however, a window of opportunity opened. Suddenly, it seemed that not only the world in general but Kenyans in particular were celebrating the achievements of women, and finding, to our surprise, that not only was there a legacy to celebrate, there was a legion of living reasons as well. And so it was, on our way to a scheduled performance at the Great Court, that a chance remark by one of my teachers transformed Harry Thuku Road from a mere space between and us and our destination into a site of praxis, a practical lesson that imbued the theory we were encountering at Forum '85 with reality.

In the twenty years since, I have often wondered why the limelight falls on African women so rarely – usually only on special occasions. Even then it tends to be on a small handful of the myriads whose lives have changed and are continuing to transform the courses of our

communities, nations, continent and the world. Every time the global spotlight rests on an African woman, be it a Wangari Maathai or an Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, it seems to blaze with surprise that this woman – 'a first! an anomaly! a rebel! an amazing superwoman!' – has somehow emerged out of the faceless crowds of downtrodden, timid, shy African women to beat insurmountable odds. Little attention is paid to the historical precedents of African women whose achievements in struggles for human rights, democracy and development span the centuries as far back as collective memory retains a hold.

Twenty years after Forum '85, the majority of African girls and women are still being socialised to believe that theirs is a legacy of passivity and inability. My generation grew up largely ignorant of role models from our own past, from whose stories we could draw inspiration for the challenges of our own times. The two decades since have not changed much in terms of offering the next generation precedents to counter negative stereotypes of what it means to be born African and female. Good African women, girls are still being told, shun 'un-African ways' that position women as political, social, military, or intellectual warriors. Twenty years later, another generation is struggling for the right to be independent actors who can make and implement life-changing decisions to the benefit of themselves, as well as their families, communities and nations. Two decades later, African women who rise to positions of visible authority are still being haunted by the possibility of failure, knowing that anything less than spectacular success will be used to affirm gendered stereotypes of 'natural inferiority'.

Twenty years after Forum '85, there is still too little discourse of hope and inspiration balancing out the grim statistics and depressing accounts of the challenges facing African women. The latter is necessary work, and I know that there is still not enough of it being done. Yet I believe there is also a need for complementary studies; carefully researched analyses exploring the lives and legacies of those

African women who have, throughout time, in different spaces, diverse circumstances and multiple ways, intervened to direct the courses of individual and collective destiny.

African history is replete with examples of women, of different classes, callings, talents, ages and circumstances, some holding offices of political, spiritual, economic, military, or social authority, who have been proactive in living out the realities of their times. Some are household names – Ahhotep of Egypt, Yaa Asantewa of the Asante, Amina of Zaria, Mbuya Nehanda of the Shona, Taitu Bethel of Ethiopia, Nzingha of Angola – even so, few know the details of their lives. The tendency to romanticise the lives of these ‘ancient African queens’ often obscures the very real challenges they faced, the struggles of decision-making and enforcing, the very real price they had to pay before their vision came close to reward. The focus on end-product – whether they were successful or not in winning the ultimate prize – negates the lessons of the process; of battles won and lost along the way and the consequences of those results; of the impact their own lives had on thousands of others.

Somewhere along the way, semi-truth replaces the facts; we begin to believe that these were a chosen few, political or religious royalty whose names are to be brought out and polished to remind us of an ancient past so far removed from today. We totally misplace their true lives; along with the thousands of stories of other women – many nameless – whose victories were no less important, whose legacy is no less valuable, and whose determination negates the illusion of powerlessness that is so often wrapped

around the African female. We replace them instead with stereotypes. We say that African women are passive acceptors, never militant – forgetting the warriors of the Abomey kingdom, the Monomotapa confederacy and the Herero nation. We claim that they have never had any say in determining the destiny of any group bigger than the nuclear family – forgetting the sacred national seers of the Akamba, the Shona, and the Lovedu. We despair that they will never stand up for their rights against political leadership that does not respect them – forgetting the South African marchers who warned ‘You strike a woman you strike a rock!’, the Nigerian ‘Women’s War’ activists who brought a government to its knees, or the Kenyan Freedom Corner mothers whose determination released their detained sons from state jails. The truth is indeed stronger than fiction, and it has the power to set free, not magically but by example.

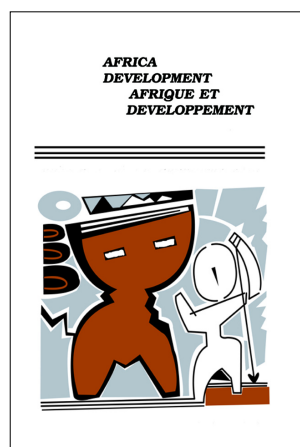
Twenty years after Forum ’85, one thing that has not changed much is the dearth of informed discourse on female African role models, whose greatest legacy is a gift of inspiration and unshakeable determination in the face of the greatest of odds. From this perspective, every story is valuable; even the failures, the missed opportunities, the wrong decisions; the weaknesses becoming lessons for the present, to be applied to the many battlefields of the twenty-first century. The challenges appear new and sometimes, in the new dispensation of a changed socio-cultural environment, they seem to be dauntingly insurmountable. The successes seem limited, scattered and far-between, so they often serve to intimidate rather than inspire. The statistics can be depressing, particularly in the face of

a discourse of disrespect and the constant ill-informed demeaning of women’s potential and track record.

Yet, twenty years after Forum ’85, there is also, more than ever before, greater potential for the recovery of these stories. More African intellectuals, both male and female, are employing the lens of gender in their work, challenging the stereotypes, examining the unjust imbalance of resource allocation and power, and laying the foundation for a more equitable distribution of social, political and economic wealth. There is improved access to a greater wealth of information now available through diverse technology, increased educational opportunities and more networking possibilities. What is now needed is a sustained effort to bring together the lived experience of the past (some of which is yet fully to be recovered through careful scholarly research) with considered analysis applying the lessons found therein to the exigencies of the present.

Four times twenty years ago and counting, Nyanjiru Muthoni looked around, appreciated the odds against her, and drew strength from the myriads of women past, present and future, whose lives converged within the space of that moment. Stripping the trappings of socio-political ordinances that constrained women to silence, she demanded the right to speak Truth, challenge injustice and take back what belonged to the people by right. ‘Take our dresses, give us your trousers!’ she cried, ‘You men are cowards! Our leader is in there – let’s go get him!’.

Inspired, emboldened and made wiser beyond our own experience by the herstories that are our gift from the past, let us go forth and get what is ours...



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