

## *Women in Movement*

### TRANSFORMATIONS IN AFRICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

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#### Abstract

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Since the mid-1980s and especially after the early 1990s, women's organizations have increased exponentially throughout Africa as have the arenas in which women have been able to assert their varied concerns. Women are organizing locally and nationally and are networking across the continent on an unprecedented scale. They have in many countries been aggressively using the media to demand their rights in a way not evident in the early 1980s. In some countries they are taking their claims to land, inheritance and associational autonomy to court in ways not seen in the past. Women are challenging laws and constitutions that do not uphold gender equality. In addition, they are increasingly moving into government, legislative, party, NGO and other leadership positions previously the nearly exclusive domain of men. In these and other ways women have taken advantage of the new political openings that occurred in the 1990s, even if the openings were limited and precarious.

This second generation of activism is markedly different from the earlier post-independence generation of women's mobilization. The reasons for these shifts are varied: the rise of multi-partyism and demise of military rule; the growing influence of the international women's movement; shifting donor strategies; the expansion of the use of the cell phone and the Internet in the late 1990s; coupled with a significant increase in secondary and university educated women. The article explores the major changes in women's mobilization in Africa by contrasting the current women's movements with those that emerged after independence.

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Keywords

Africa, women, women's movements, women and politics

Women's organizations have increased exponentially throughout Africa since the early 1990s as have the arenas in which women have been able to assert their varied concerns. Today women are organizing locally and nationally and are networking across the continent on an unprecedented scale. They have been aggressively using the media to demand their rights in a way not as evident in the early 1980s. In some countries they are taking their claims to land, inheritance and associational autonomy to court in ways not seen in the past. Women are challenging laws and constitutions that do not uphold gender equality. In addition, they are moving into government, legislative, party, NGO and other leadership positions previously the exclusive domain of men. They are fighting for a female presence in areas where women were previously marginalized such as the leadership of religious institutions, sports clubs and boards of private and public institutions.

In these and other ways women have taken advantage of the new political openings that occurred in the 1990s, even if the openings were limited and precarious. The expansion of women's organizations and associational life more generally accompanied the move away from the older single party systems toward multi-party politics and the demise of military regimes in favor of civilian rule. The expansion of freedom of speech and of association, although usually constrained, also increased possibilities for new forms of mobilization. The international women's movement and, in particular the 1985 and 1995 UN Women's conferences in Nairobi and Beijing respectively, gave added impetus to women's mobilization. Moreover, shifting donor strategies gave greater emphasis to non-governmental organizations in the 1990s, and women's organizations were among the main beneficiaries of the new funding orientations. The expansion of the use of the cell phone, e-mail and the Internet in the late 1990s, although primarily among the urban organizations, enhanced networking exponentially, not only Africa-wide and internationally but also domestically. These new conditions, coupled with a significant increase in secondary and university educated women since independence, set the stage for new forms of women's mobilization.

This article first summarizes the patterns of women's mobilization in the period after independence in the early 1960s up to the late 1980s, when new forms of women's mobilization began to emerge. It then explores some of the main factors that account for these changes. In the next section it looks at some of the characteristics of women's new mobilization strategies, including the diversity in the types of organizations created, the autonomy of these new associations from the regime and/or ruling party in terms of leadership, financing and agendas. The article examines the ways in which autonomy was challenged by the authorities and defended by women's organizations. It shows how in this period women's associations expanded their focus from developmental issues to the inclusion of more explicitly political concerns through legislative and constitutional changes, advocacy and demands for female leadership and representation. The article then identifies ways in which women's collective action is distinct from that of other interest groups.

These differences lie not only in its goals, but also in the size of the movements, their inclusiveness, the unique ways they link the personal and political and the use of motherhood as a political resource. Finally, the article examines the diversity of debates within the women's movements and concludes with reasons for the transformations in women's mobilization after the late 1980s.

The article outlines some of the main changes that have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. It recognizes that even though Africa is a continent of enormous diversity based on culture, language, colonial legacy, history, political orientation and other dimensions, some general patterns and trends have emerged in women's mobilization in the context of political liberalization. This article is thus one of the first attempts to begin to identify a set of commonalities shared by a growing number of women's movements in Africa. Because of this intended focus, it does not explore many of the differences that will need to be further interrogated. The article is, however, limited by the lack of country-specific literature in several parts of Africa, especially in several of the francophone and lusophone countries. As more research is published on these parts of Africa, the conclusions will no doubt become more nuanced.

#### WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION AFTER INDEPENDENCE

In the earlier post-independence period, women's organizations tended to be focused around religious, welfare and domestic concerns. Local handicrafts, savings, farming, income generating, religious and cultural clubs dominated the associational landscape of women. The discourse was primarily one of 'developmentalism' (Ngugi c. 2001). Women's organizations adopted a Women in Development approach, which was generally divorced from political concerns. They did focus on research into discriminatory practices and laws and on consciousness raising, referred to in English-speaking Africa as 'gender sensitization' or 'conscientization' (Geisler 1995: 546). However, in general they were reluctant to engage in advocacy and push for changes in laws, if it put them at odds with the government authorities.

For example, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYW), which has had the largest membership of any organization in Kenya, was confined to improving childcare, domestic care, handicrafts, agricultural techniques, literacy and engaging in sports (Wipper 1975: 100). The conservative stance of this organization, which persists to this day, is reflected in the thinking of its president at the time, Jane Kiano, who claimed in 1972 that 'women in this country do not need a liberation movement because all doors are open to us' (Sahle 1998: 178). Hussaina Abdullah (1993: 27) argued that the key state-sponsored women's institutions in Nigeria, i.e. Better Life Programme, National Commission for Women and National Council of Women's Societies, were primarily concerned with keeping women in their roles as mothers. Ngugi says of the Nigerian National Council of Women's Societies, which

was formed in 1959: 'Unlike the human rights organizations like FIDA ① [Women Lawyers], it has not ruffled the feathers of the male dominated state by taking up issues on women's rights vis-à-vis men, such as equality and equal representation' (c. 2001).

At the national level, the mass women's organizations had been tied to the single party or regime. Some were formed after 1975 in response to the UN Resolution calling on member states to 'establish the appropriate government machinery to accelerate the integration of women in development and the elimination of discrimination against women on grounds of sex'. In response to this resolution, some countries set up ministries of women (Cote d'Ivoire), others established women's bureaus, departments or divisions within a ministry of community development or some other non-gender specific rubric (Kenya). Yet others established commissions, committees or councils like the National Council on Women and Development formed by the ruling National Redemption Council in Ghana or the National Council of Women in Uganda formed by Idi Amin that was situated inside the Prime Minister's office. In creating the Council, Amin simultaneously banned all other women's organizations. By 1985 almost all African countries had set up a national machinery of some kind and the mass organizations were generally under the auspices of these machineries. The success of the machineries was limited by the extent to which their respective governments funded them (Tsikata 1989: 81; Mama 1995: 40).

Where the national machineries were not in and of themselves an umbrella organization for local women's groups, umbrella organizations were sometimes formed by the ruling authorities, like the Nigerian National Council of Women Societies (NCWS). Other such politically inspired organizations catered to particular constituencies like the Better Life for Rural Women in Nigeria. Still others were aimed at mobilizing all women under one mass organization, for example, the 31st December Women's Movement in Ghana, Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania, Women's League in Zambia and Association des Femmes de Niger (AFN). These organizations were generally run along patronage lines by wives, daughters and relatives of male leaders in the regime. For example, in Nigeria until the 1990s, wives of prominent state officials dominated the leadership of NCWS.

First ladies frequently headed up the larger national women's organizations: Nana Agyemang Rawlings chaired the 31st December Women's Movement in Ghana; Maryam Babangida headed the Better Life for Rural Women in Nigeria; while Betty Kaunda was affiliated with Women's League in Zambia. In the 1990s first ladies started becoming patrons of the new independent NGOs as the large mass organizations lost their appeal. For example, Janet Museveni, wife of Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni, is patron of the popular Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans (UWESO). However, even these NGOs have been used politically as in the Zambian case, where the former president's wife, Vera Chiluba, used her Hope Foundation to attack the political opposition.

In the past, and even today as in the case of mass party-affiliated organizations like Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYW) in Kenya, nominees for leadership elections typically had to be approved by the ruling party. Their funding generally came from the party or government. Their party-dictated agendas were limited and basically did not challenge the status quo when it came to pushing for women's advancement. This is not to say there were no instances of political mobilization for women. However, generally it was limited. For example, NCWS in Nigeria lobbied the Government to amend its discriminatory population control policies that targeted only women and not men. It also got the state commission for women upgraded into a full-fledged Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. But for the most part, these structures did not tackle the difficult laws, policies and practices that discriminated against women.

Another case in point is Ghana under Jerry Rawlings (1981–2000), who came to power through a military takeover and headed up a populist government under the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) from 1981 to 2000. The PNDC reformed laws affecting women, including inheritance laws and the banning of degrading widowhood rites. The national machinery charged with coordinating women's activities, the National Council for Women and Development (NCWD) was active in promoting such legislation. However, during these years, Ghana's women's movement was constrained by the Government both in terms of growth, vitality, breadth of its agenda and capacity to bring about major changes in the status of women. By trying to subsume the entire women's movement within the PNDC by creating the 31st December Women's Movement (31DWM) in 1981 as one of its 'revolutionary organizations', the regime crippled the women's movement and limited it to publicizing and promoting government policies. As Tsikata put it: the relationship between women's groups and the regime 'has been maintained at the expense of the women's struggle . . . In so doing women's issues have been shelved; or at best, they have received very casual attention' (1989: 89). The close ties between the 31DWM and the government/ruling party have basically kept the organization from exerting pressure on the Government to adopt policies that would promote the welfare and interests of women (Mikell 1984; Dei 1994: 140). As 31DWM absorbed many independent women's organizations at the grassroots level, women were left with muted representation.

Even though these organizations claimed to represent the interests of all women in their respective countries, especially rural women, they often served as mechanisms for generating votes and support for the country's single party, getting women to attend party rallies and meetings, and sing, dance and cook for visiting dignitaries. Beyond these functions they were kept apolitical. They were, in fact, used to contain women's political activity within these designated women's organizations, which meant that few women ever worked outside the bounds of these organizations to involve themselves in the actual parties (Geisler 1995: 553). This further reinforced women's political marginalization. In a multi-party context, these state affiliated

mass unions, leagues, women's wings of parties and umbrella organizations decreased in importance as a plurality of new independent associations emerged. In some cases, women's organizations like Maendeleo ya Wanawake, which has thousands of affiliates throughout the country, remains de facto linked to the dominant party in Kenya, the Kenya African National Union, but is officially an independent organization.

There are still countries where this old model persists that have not embraced new autonomous organizations. For example in Eritrea today, there is basically only one national women's organization, the National Union of Eritrea Women (NUEW), which was founded by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front in 1979, when it was fighting for Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. After independence was achieved in 1991, the 200,000-member organization became semi-autonomous and shifted to educate women for involvement in service provision and project management, but did little in the way of advocacy. It did succeed in making a few modest changes in the old Ethiopian civil code. For example, marriage contracts had to be made with the full consent of both parties; the eligible age for marriage for girls was raised from 15 years old to 18 years old to match that of men; and the sentence for rape was extended to fifteen years. But NUEW did little to concretely address the backlash against women that occurred after independence from Ethiopia. Many felt that there was a need for a multiplicity of organizations to work on the most pressing issues, but the few organizations that attempted to work as autonomous organizations were closed down by the Government on various pretexts (Connell 1998).

#### REASONS FOR THE TRANSFORMATIONS IN MOBILIZATION

What then gave rise to these new women's movements in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s? There is no one explanation but some of the most important reasons for women's heightened activism in Africa would include the following:

As mentioned earlier, the move toward multi-partyism in most African countries in the 1990s diminished the need for mass organizations linked and directed by the single ruling party. Where the state opened up to women's independent mobilization, the new organizations flourished. Thus, the opening of political space that occurred in the early 1990s allowed for the formation of many new autonomous organizations. In addition to these changing opportunity structures, women also found that they had new resources at their disposal. Much of formal politics in Africa is underwritten and controlled by informal patronage politics. Economic crisis forced many women into formal and informal economic associations and into heightened entrepreneurial activity, giving them the resources with which to operate autonomously of state leaders. Increased donor funding of women's associations also helped break the ties with patronage networks. In addition, with the increase

in educational opportunities for girls and women in Africa, a larger pool of capable women who were in a position to lead organizations emerged, especially at the national level.

Women in many countries frequently had longer experiences than men in creating and sustaining associations, having been involved in church-related activities, savings clubs, income-generating groups, self-help associations, community improvement groups and many other informal and local organizations and networks. Thus, they often found it easier to take advantage of new political spaces afforded by liberalizing regimes. Women in Mali, for example, brought to NGOs their well-developed organizational skills, drawing on a long history of maintaining social and economic networks. As a result, women claimed a strong presence in the NGO movement both in terms of making sure development associations include programs that address women's issues, but also in their own organizations that range from legal to health, education, credit and enterprise development associations (Kante and Hobgood 1994). Similarly, in Tanzania, it is no accident that the main NGO networking body, Tanzania Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO), was started by women's organizations and has had strong female representation in its leadership.

Donors placed greater emphasis on funding NGO activities in the 1990s. For example, by the late 1990s, almost 40 percent of USAID program funds in Africa were going to Private Voluntary Organizations and NGOs. Part of this aid was directed at NGOs because it was easier to ensure accountability from them than from the state, but also, as Owiti (2000) has pointed out, because of the role they could play as counterweights to the state, as monitors of the state and as sources of reform and pressure for social justice and democratization.

For women's organizations and movements, the 1990s saw a shift in donor strategies from a sole emphasis on funding activities related to economic development, education, health and welfare concerns to an added interest in advocacy around women's rights, and promoting women's political leadership and political participation. In Africa, parties were generally weak and did not play much of a role in advocacy, leaving associations to carry out many of the interest aggregation functions often associated with parties. Donors began to fund organizations involved in advocacy around equality clauses in constitutions undergoing revision. They supported non-partisan activities around legislation regarding women's land ownership, marriage and inheritance, female genital cutting, rape, domestic violence and many other such issues. Other donors helped support women's caucuses of parliamentarians or members of constituent assemblies. As the decade progressed, funding for national and regional networking also increased.

Although the driving forces for these changes were internal, international pressures and norms gave added impetus to these new demands. The international women's movement played a significant role in influencing women's mobilization and encouraging women in Africa to think how their struggles

related to an emerging globalization of women's concern for equality (Mbire-Barungi 1999: 435). The UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, for example, encouraged women's organizations to hold their governments accountable to their various commitments to improving women's status. Women's organizations also learned considerably from sharing experiences and strategies with activists from other parts of Africa and the world. As in Latin America, the Beijing conference legitimized key elements of feminist discourse in African NGOs, parties, states, international development agencies and other fora (Alvarez 1998: 295).

Networking carried out domestically, throughout Africa and internationally, was greatly facilitated by the use of the Internet and e-mail. Many regionally based organizations focused on making information available to activists and policy makers on women's experiences, realities and organizational strategies. The use of cell phones, especially starting in the late 1990s, exponentially increased the level of communications both within urban areas but also between rural and urban areas. This had a dramatic impact on the ability of groups to mount campaigns and build political support around various issues. New organizations like Gender in Africa Information Network and Sangonet became involved in promoting the use of information and communication technologies.

Finally, the expansion of media coverage of women's issues, especially promoted by members of new women's media associations in various parts of Africa, provided the mainstream media outlets and women's own media houses an alternate coverage of women to counter the often demeaning and sexist portrayal of women in the media. Information on the activities of women's organizations and their leaders has also helped publicize and give further impetus to the movements (Ojiambo Ochieng 1998: 33).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION

A new generation of autonomous organizations emerged primarily after the 1985 UN Nairobi women's conference, although a few had started earlier. The earliest of the new generation of organizations included Women in Nigeria, formed in 1982, Uganda's Action for Development, formed in 1986 and Tanzania Media Women's Association, formed in 1987. These associations became pioneers in the new push to advance women's rights. They were characterized by their autonomy from the state, which meant that they were heterogeneous in the kinds of issues they took up.

### Heterogeneity of Organizations

In the new context, the heterogeneity of organizations was striking. At the national level women formed myriad organizations, including professional associations of women doctors, engineers, bankers, lawyers, accountants,

market traders, entrepreneurs and media workers. There were national women's rights groups; organizations focusing on specific issues like reproductive rights, violence against women and rape; groups catering to particular sections of the population, including disabled women and widows. Some provided services to women in areas of health, transportation, banking, protection, legal aid, publishing and education to respond to the neglect of women in the mainstream institutions (Olojede 1999). New forms of developmentally oriented organizations became especially popular in the 1990s such as women's credit and finance associations as well as hometown and development associations. Women also formed social and cultural organizations. Some occupational and political institutions like trade unions and parties often had a wing devoted to women.

Most organizations, both at the local and national level, were in some way concerned with advancing women's political, economic, legal or social status. Women's advancement was being pushed on many perhaps unexpected fronts. The Uganda Women Football Association successfully worked to introduce women's soccer throughout the country. They sought corporate and government sponsorship for games, equipment, training and uniforms, all of which have been difficult to come by (Zziwa 1996: 15). Second wives in polygamous relationships have been mobilizing in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania and have been meeting on both a national and regional basis. Women parliamentarians have national caucuses and are also meeting regionally, for example the Union of Women Parliamentarians in East Africa.

Women even began to claim leadership of organizations that had primarily a male-membership base, allowing them to introduce women's concerns into new arenas. There were many firsts: a woman, Constantia Pandeni, was elected for the first time to head the Mineworkers Union of Namibia in 2001; Olive Zaitun Kigongo was the first woman elected president of Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2002; and Solomy Balungi Bossa was the first woman to head the Uganda Law Society in 1993.

In war torn areas, women organized across enemy (ethnic, clan, religious, regional) to find bases for peace. We saw bold efforts of this kind in Congo, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sudan, Rwanda and other countries. Often they formed coalitions and networks for peace and/or collaborated in joint, mutually beneficial activities that help build new bases for solidarity.

At the local level there were numerous multi-purpose clubs that engaged in savings, farming, income-generating projects, handicrafts, sports, cultural events and other functions, depending on the needs and priorities of members (Strobel 1979; Feldman 1983: 68; Mwaniki 1986: 215).

Even many older organizational forms were revived or modified, including location-based development associations and dual sex organizations. One type of organization tied to a cultural gender division was the dual sex societies. There has been a revival of the dual sex governance structures in Igbo as well as other West African societies. A dual sex political system is one in which representatives of each gender govern their own members through a Council. In

much of former Eastern Nigeria most communities had a broad-based Women's Governing Council that had sole jurisdiction over wide ranging political, economic and cultural affairs of women, from market issues, to relations with men, and to morality. These organizations, according to Nzegwu (1995), were autonomous of the state, yet their decisions were binding regardless of social status, education or income level. Moreover, the local councils could represent women living as far apart as Lagos, Kano or New York. Their leaders serviced a wide range of associations and therefore were multifaceted in their approach, since they were concerned with social, cultural, religious, economic and political issues simultaneously (Nzegwu 1995).

Some organizations had branches throughout Africa, including the Forum for African Women's Educationalists (FAWE) that worked on issues having to do with girls' education; Women in Law and Development (WILDAF); Society for Women and AIDS in Africa; Akina Mama wa Africa; and many others. Others were regionally based, including Women and Law in East Africa and Southern Africa and Association de Lutte Contre les Violences Faites aux Femmes. Still others were part of international associations, for example, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Girl Guides, Zonta International.

Most organizations in which women have involved themselves were gender specific, partly as an outgrowth of cultural divisions of labor and a historic preference for gender specific organization. Women have often shared an implicit understanding based on past experiences that by cooperating with men in mixed organizations, they run the risk that men might hijack the organizations and their finances.

### Autonomy

The new generation of organizations tended to be independent of the regime and of ruling political parties both in terms of their leadership and agendas. Perhaps in reaction to the dominance of single women's organizations and umbrella organizations under authoritarian rule, there was little interest in creating large overarching organizations and no attempt to create organizations that could speak for all women's interests, as there had been in the past. Instead, the new organizations represented a diversity of interests and political leanings. They came together in coalitions and networked around land issues, violence against women, women's political participation, constitutional reform and other such concerns, rather than attempting to form all-encompassing structures.

The new autonomous organizations were also financially independent of the state or ruling party. Women in Nigeria (WIN), one of the earliest of these new organizations, had primarily funded its activities through membership fees, sale of publications, T-shirts, levies, grants and donations from individuals, organizations and agencies with similar objectives. Members also

provided skills free of charge or parts of their houses for office space. Changing donor strategies to assist organizations were evident as WIN gained external donor support for specific projects after 1991 (Olojede 1999).

Financial independence meant that the new organizations were outside the patronage networks that the ruling party and/or state used to build loyalty. Their very existence challenged the legitimacy of state patronage, which had been on the decline throughout the 1990s. This made these autonomous associations potentially threatening to the state, especially if they involved large numbers of rural women, as was the case with the tree planting Green Belt Movement in Kenya, that had been increasingly repressed by the Government. The ruling party's (Kenya African National Union (KANU)) fight for the political loyalty of autonomous rural women's groups was particularly fierce as their numbers increased and economic resources grew. KANU politicians courted and manipulated local women's groups and made promises of patronage in order to win their votes (Sahle 1998: 175, 182–4). Some male politicians even formed women's groups through their female relatives in order to garner votes (Kabira and Nzioki 1993: 70). Thus, many have concluded, as Kabira and Nzioki did in Kenya, that the 'first and most important issue to resolve is the question of autonomy' (1993: 73).

Associational autonomy was critical to the success and legitimacy of this new generation of organizations. When the 12 June 1993 Nigerian presidential elections were annulled, this led to a serious human rights crisis. WIN and other human rights and pro-democracy activists launched a media campaign and demonstrated against the human rights abuses under the military administration, including the planting of explosives; disappearances of opposition politicians as well as human rights and pro-democracy activists; and destruction of public property (Olojede 1999). These efforts and others eventually culminated in the restoration of an elected civilian government in May 1999, after which the most blatant human rights violations diminished considerably (Obiorah 2001). But clearly the organizations tied to the regime did not respond to the annulment of the elections in the same way that the autonomous ones did. As the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) benefited from government largesse, it was 'very unlikely for NCWS to pursue autonomous positions or present strong opposition to government on significant political issues such as political accountability and human rights', Olojede (1999) argues.

More than at any time in Africa's post-independence period, women's organizations found themselves challenging the Government's gender policies, pushing for changes in legislation and policy regarding inheritance and property ownership, land ownership, women's political leadership and many other issues. But in Africa, where the majority of regimes today are semi-authoritarian, power is still thought of in zero-sum terms, even in a multi-party context. Any manifestation of opposition to government policy, even basic advocacy around a policy change, could be interpreted by the authorities as a sign of adopting an anti-governmental position. NGO mobilization, especially where it is active, is seen frequently as 'political', hence 'anti-governmental'

and threatening. As a result, some organizations came under attack by their governments, which tried to revoke their registration, co-opt their leadership, buy off the organizations and harass and manipulate their leaders.

A case in point is a struggle that erupted after the 1995 formation of the Tanzanian Women's Council (BAWATA), which had been launched by the ruling party's women's wing, Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania (UWT). Initially, elements within the leadership of the UWT had wanted to make the wing independent of the party, but the top party and the UWT leadership opposed this strategy. Instead, they decided to form an 'independent' non-governmental umbrella organization that could access donor funds yet remain under UWT's thumb. One top official in the ministry explained that women's NGOs did not feel 'comfortable with the Ministry' and so the thinking was that the Ministry would find it easier to 'monitor, regulate and collaborate' with women's groups through a separate council.

BAWATA's leadership envisioned a broad-based autonomous organization that was to push for women's advancement on a number of fronts, including strengthening women's political leadership, pushing for legislative change and conducting civic education. It claimed a membership of 150,000 in 3,000 groups, although its actual strength at the grassroots level is disputed. BAWATA became involved in policy advocacy on issues such as violence against women, sexual abuse of children, improved social services delivery, inheritance laws, land ownership and girls' access to education. BAWATA drew up a document evaluating each of the presidential candidates and their parties in the 1995 elections regarding women. In doing so, they had overstepped their bounds in a society where the female electorate was critical to the ruling party's continued success.

As Chris Peter explained:

Every sensible State knows that women are faithful voters. They normally register and actually go to vote. Unlike men who talk a lot and do little. They might even register only to forget to vote on the elections day. Thus women are regarded as a safe and sure constituency and whoever controls them is guaranteed victory. By touching this sensitive area – BAWATA was seen as a mischievous lot.

(Peter 1999: 11)

The Ministry of Home Affairs banned BAWATA on the grounds that it was operating as a political party and was not holding meetings or submitting annual financial accounts to the Registrar of Societies. The Minister of Home Affairs warned in July 1997 that NGOs engaging in hostile exchanges of words with the Government would risk losing their registration as would NGOs that confronted the Government through forums that created confusion and <sup>③</sup>insecurity. An NGO policy drafted by the Office of the Vice President (1997) stated that 'NGOs as legal entities are restricted from engaging in any activity that will be construed to be political in nature', but are allowed to 'engage in

debate on development issues'. The charges against BAWATA, which by all accounts were fabricated, indicated that the party and the Government were not interested in permitting the formation of independent organizations with a bold agenda that might diverge from the party's interests. One top UWT leader, who was also the Minister of Local Government, ordered women District Commissioners to discourage women from participating in BAWATA because it was being managed by women who were allegedly too 'independent-minded'.

BAWATA took the matter to the High Court on the grounds that the government action was unconstitutional and in violation of international human rights conventions, to which Tanzania is a signatory. The Court issued an injunction against the Government prohibiting it from deregistering BAWATA. In the meantime, members of BAWATA faced death threats, harassment and intimidation, sometimes even from security officers. Husbands of BAWATA leaders were demoted or lost their government jobs, while members of the organization's branches faced intimidation from local authorities. Local chapters found themselves unable to meet and run their nursery schools and day care centers. Although BAWATA eventually won its case against the Government, in the process the organization was destroyed and the intimidation of its leadership left local chapters in disarray.

The deregistration of BAWATA was widely condemned by other NGOs who were disturbed and demoralized by the implications of this action on the freedom of association. As one lawyer and journalist, Robert Rweyemamu put it:

- ④ Can an NGO geared to the development of the people be completely cut off from political life? It [the deregistration of BAWATA] is a test for those who claim to be devoted to uplifting the social, economic and cultural standards of Tanzanians.

Rweyemamu (1997)

In Tanzania, which has been a multi-party state since 1992, the BAWATA case illustrates the limits of freedom of association and speech, even in a fairly tolerant country. The fate of BAWATA is indicative of the prevalent view that equates autonomous non-governmental activities with an anti-governmental stance, making any kind of advocacy difficult.

In Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa the most active women's organizations with the most far-reaching agendas often had difficulty registering, or had their registration delayed indefinitely. They faced external manipulations and pressures to keep opposition party members from leadership of the organizations, even though their activities were non-partisan in the context of the association. In the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, NGOs found themselves opposing governmental legislative efforts to create an agency for the monitoring and control of NGO activities in Tanzania, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Uganda. Uganda has some of the best NGO-government relations in Africa, but in 2001 even Ugandan NGOs were forced

to protest stepped up government efforts to increase scrutiny of NGOs and threaten their autonomy. In particular they rejected government efforts to create a board that would be based in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, giving the board a focus on security rather than developmental concerns. All these examples of repression or efforts to control and monitor NGOs exposed the limits of freedom of association even in liberalizing countries.

#### Emphasis on Political Strategies

Although the older welfare and domestic agendas persisted into the 1990s in women's organizations, a new emphasis on political participation emerged. New women's organizations formed to improve leadership skills, encourage women's political involvement on a non-partisan basis, lobby for women's political leadership, press for legislative changes and conduct civic education. Groups mobilized around issues like domestic violence, rape, reproductive rights, sex education in the school curriculum, female genital cutting, sexual harassment, disparaging representation of women in the media, corruption and other concerns that had rarely been addressed by the women's movements in the past and often were considered taboo by the Government.

Kabira and Nzioki underscored the need for women to assert themselves politically in a 1993 statement that was indicative of the change in thinking that had occurred in the early 1990s, that is, a shift from a previous emphasis strictly on developmental approaches to a new adoption of political strategies. As they explained:

The state may criticize women's organisations as being elitist, ineffective, politically motivated, misguided or foreign. But women have to go where power and resources are by being powerful and resourceful themselves. Since groups know and express this desire, we suggest that women's organisations and political leaders focus their attention on long term changes that touch on the root causes of women's inequality and subordination in society. This approach will advance the women's cause towards meaningful transformation as opposed to individual advancement.

(Kabira and Nzioki 1993: 73)

#### DISTINCTIVENESS OF WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE ACTION

Women's mobilization, while sharing much in common with other interest groups, also stood apart from them in important ways. They often represented the largest organized group within society. Their new organizations were not only pluralistic in the kinds of issues they took up, they were also internally pluralistic in their makeup. The demise of the single party and its affiliated women's organization often meant a decline in ethnically based mobilization

in which the ethnic group in political power dominated women's associations. Similarly expanded educational opportunities also helped break the past dominance of specific ethnic or religious groups in the leadership of women's groups, who had come from regions where missionary education had first been concentrated. Women's mobilizations also drew in particular ways on women's identification with motherhood and the private sphere to make claims on participation in the public sphere. But it also worked the other way around as women saw that participation in the public sphere gave them entitlements to make claims for greater decision making within the home.

### Largest Organized Sector

Women's associations often constituted the largest organized sector in many countries. They made up the majority of NGOs in countries like Tanzania and Mali. In Kenya they were the fastest growing sector of civil society (Ngugi c.2001). Other sectors may have even ended up numerically dominated by women's organizations. The largest proportion of human rights organizations in Africa, for example, were women's rights organizations. In Kenya 40 percent of all human rights groups operating in 1992-7 were women's organizations. The majority of lay organizations in both Protestant and Catholic churches were women's groups and women in general were more active than men in church activities. Although men participated in savings and credit associations, by far the majority of participants in such organizations in most African countries were women. In Uganda, it was widely acknowledged that no other societal group was as organized and cohesive as women's organizations when it came to making a concerted effort to influence the constitution-writing process. Women's organizations wrote more memoranda submitted to the Constitutional Commission than any other sector of society (Bainomugisha 1999: 93).

The number of women's networks, coalitions and ad hoc issue-oriented alliances was multiplying throughout Africa, also suggesting a strengthening of the non-governmental sector. Given the weakness of existing political parties, women's NGO coalitions and networks represented a more stable coalescing of interests. In a country like Uganda, coalitions of NGOs formed in the 1990s around national debt, domestic violence, the common property clause within the Land Act, the domestic relations bill and to change the way in which women politicians were elected through an electoral college that was susceptible to manipulation. Also more ad hoc and short-term coalitions formed around particular incidents. Such coalitions formed, for example, when a male member of parliament almost slapped a female member of parliament. They formed to abolish the customary practice in which the Buganda king was to have had sexual relations with a virgin prior to his wedding ceremony in 1998; to protest the Italian court's ruling in 1999 that a woman wearing jeans could not be raped; and to protest racist statements of a top US Agency for Development officer in 2001.

### Building Cross-Cutting Ties

A related characteristic of women's mobilization that set it apart from other forms of mobilization was the keen interest in building ties across ethnic, clan and religious lines, especially where relations in the broader society had been conflictual. As women's organizations were trying to influence opinion, practice and policy affecting over half of society, the movements generally sought to be as broad as possible and saw their goal as influencing society at large. Unlike other movements, women who identified with aspects of the women's movement could be found in government, in the media, in trade unions, in environmental and human rights groups, in their own organizations, in grassroots organizations and throughout society. In other words, the movement permeated society in a way that other societal interests did not. Even environmental and human rights activists hardly claimed the kind of popular support the women's movements enjoyed in many countries. Other societal organizations were focused around catering to the interests of their particular constituencies such as labor, cooperatives, vendors and therefore did not aspire to build a popular base.

For example, in South Africa, no other group united as broad a spectrum of individuals as the Women's National Coalition (WNC), which was formed in 1991. It brought together eighty-one organizational affiliates and thirteen regional alliances of women's organizations, including organizations affiliated with the African National Congress, the Inkatha Freedom Party, the National Party, Pan Africanist Congress, Azanian Peoples Organization and the Democratic Party. WNC also brought together interests as diverse as the Rural Women's Movement, Union of Jewish Women and the South African Domestic Workers Union. Over three million women participated in focus groups organized by WNC to voice their opinions on women's concerns. Regional and national conferences were held and a Woman's Charter was drafted and endorsed by the national parliament and all nine regional parliaments in 1994. The Charter addressed a broad range of concerns, including equality, legal rights, economic issues, education, health, politics and violence against women (Kemp *et al.* 1995: 151). The new constitution allows for the Charter to be used as a basis for reforming government policy regarding gender concerns.

The inclusiveness could be found along many dimensions. Women's organizations, unlike most civil society actors (with some important exceptions like hometown and development associations), were usually also very concerned with how to build rural-urban linkages and bridge some of the gaps that divided better educated women involved in national organizations from rural women in local groups.

Due to the limited resources of NGOs and the monetary weakness of their constituent base, they relied heavily on donors to fund their activities. This has resulted in what some might call the 'NGO-ization' of feminism, which refers to the evolution of a feminist movement of professionals that since the 1995 UN Beijing conference has come to rely heavily on urban educated women. In

the Latin American context these professionals were divorced from grassroots women's organizations (Alvarez 1998: 306–8). NGOs were important to the women's movements in Africa and were very much a part of them, but they were not the only arena of women's mobilization. There did not exist in Africa the same kind of rift between women's NGOs and the 'movement'.

Although there were gaps between the rural and urban groups and between educated and poorer women's organizations, the aim was always explicitly to bridge those gaps and cooperate as much as resources and time permitted. It was not just national organizations that sought these linkages. In Uganda, even educated women in rural towns sought to share their income-generating skills and know-how regarding nutrition, child-rearing, prenatal care and preventative health measures with poorer rural women. Others encouraged rural women to get into business or to save money. For example, A Stitch in Time Women's Association was formed in Kabale in 1989 for women involved in tailoring, crocheting and making carpets. But it also had as an objective to help poorer less educated women's groups get involved in income-generating activities and savings clubs with the understanding that women's economic clout was a key to their empowerment. I found many such examples of rural–urban linkages in my study of the political impact of women's associations in Uganda 1992–2000 (Tripp 2000).

#### Making the Political Personal

One of the reasons women have prioritized political action has to do with the indignities and difficulties they face on the domestic front. Unlike other sectors of society, there is no way to address women's advancement in the public realm without also tackling their obstacles on the domestic front and vice versa. In African movements, women have not only made the personal political, but they have also sought political power and influence in order to make the political personal (Geiger 1998). The battle in the two spheres is inseparable. For example, in the 2001 Ugandan presidential elections, women's organizations, including the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), made appeals to the Electoral Commission and the media to warn against intimidation and harassment by husbands of wives over differing political opinions. In the 1996 elections there were numerous reports of women killed, beaten, thrown out of homes and some had their voters' cards grabbed from them or destroyed as a result of these differing views. As a result of official and media warnings, there were no reported incidents of politically related domestic violence in the 2001 elections.

#### Motherhood as a Basis of Political Authority

The public and private spheres are connected in other ways as well. Women have different resources from men with which to fight for change in the

context of political movements. Due to the historically cultural separation between women's and men's mobilization, women have often used their position as 'mothers' as a basis of moral authority from which to argue for their inclusion in politics. They have used it as a resource with which to demand political changes not only in practice, but also in political culture, demanding that the values of nurturing, caring and justice be included in political practice and that corruption be rejected. As Winnie Byanyima, Ugandan Member of Parliament and leader of the women's rights group Forum for Women in Development, explained in a reference to 'eating' (a metaphor with multiple meanings but often connoting personal appropriation of state resources):

Values which we women care about such as caring, serving, building, reconciling, healing and sheer decency are becoming absent from our political culture. This eating is crude, self-centered, egoistic, shallow, narrow and ignorant. We should ban eating from our political language. Madam Chairman, ... it is a culture which we must denounce and do away with if we are to start a new nation.

(Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly 1994: 1490)

The use of motherhood is not the only basis for women's authority, nor is it the only resource used by women, but neither is it considered controversial nor problematic in the way that it is regarded by many western feminist academics and activists. Judith Van Allen (2000) has shown that the public/private divide in Tswana society, but even more generally in Africa, does not correspond to western perceptions, which draw a sharp divide between domestic/household/child-rearing activities and work/politics/warfare. In Africa, women's labor, whether it is in the fields, in a factory or as a professional is generally seen as an extension of her reproductive activities, as part of caring for her children, and feeding and clothing them. In politics, as in other 'public spaces', women generally want equality but they do not aspire to be considered in the same way as men. As Van Allen explains:

Women's rights discourse itself reflects the continuing construction of 'woman' as 'mother,' and the assertion of the nurturing, provisioning, suckling mother as a model of female leadership, both in its goals and in its language ... In campaign slogans and campaign discourse in general, this assumption is carried into a positive statement about women: they are better fitted than men to be in government because it is in their 'nature' to be caretakers.

(Van Allen 2000: 8)

One women's rights organization, Emang Basadi, even has had as its slogan: 'Vote a Woman! Suckle the Nation!'

Women sometimes draw on their domestic experiences to create a new kind of political imagery that defies the paternal one that evolved with the colonial state and has remained in the post-colonial context. For example, in

Kenya during the 1992 elections, one delegate argued at a meeting of the National Committee on the Status of Women that since women carry the responsibility for the security and stability of the family and community, 'let it be understood that women are already minister of culture in their own homes' and now they want to take charge of key portfolios (International Press Service 1992).

⑤ Alexandra Tibbetts (1994) shows how elderly rural mothers of pro-democracy political prisoners in Kenya drew on their position of being mothers in 1992 to claim a public political identity in protesting the imprisonment of their sons, who had been incarcerated since October 1990 for demanding multi-partyism and who were still imprisoned long after multi-partyism had been adopted in December 1991. The moral authority of older mothers made their protest a particularly powerful one in demanding justice, especially when they stripped themselves naked in a confrontation with police, who were trying to end their hunger strike in Uhuru Park in the center of Nairobi. They drew on the prevalent cultural imagery and symbolism to give added potency to their protest, drawing attention to the maternal body, which in Kenyan society is a symbol of the life-generating potential of women. In the Kenyan context, and also more generally in Africa, the public nakedness of women, especially older women, is the ultimate curse, in this particular case, aimed at the Government. The women, who had never been involved in politics, launched their protest in February 1992. As one of the women, Gladys Thiitu wa Kariuki, put it: 'The pain of bearing a child does not allow me to let my son continue suffering in prison.' Not only did the women speak bravely against the injustices of the Government, but hundreds of Kenyans came to where the women were staging their hunger strike and set up microphones for anyone who wished to speak.

Although the maternal symbolism is still powerful, Van Allen argues that in Botswana and other parts of Africa, there is a gradual shift taking place as a result of the expansion of market forces from the system of authority based on kinship to a gender-based system as in the West. In other words, people had been relating to each other primarily in the context of the kin categories such as 'father', 'mother', 'son' and 'daughter'. Increasingly, however, they are adopting a gender system based on the categories, male and female, in which social relations are not defined by custom but are being negotiated within the context of changing urban capitalist societies (Van Allen 2000).

## DEBATES WITHIN WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Given the pluralism seen in types of organizations found in African women's movements and given the inclusiveness of their memberships, it comes as no surprise that women's movements encompass a plurality of views regarding how women's interests should best be conceived, prioritized and pursued. The

debates have varied depending on the country and organization. I will highlight a few issues that have been evident in multiple contexts.

In some countries, there were debates over the utility of reserved seats and quotas for women in legislatures (e.g. Cameroon, Tanzania, Nigeria, Kenya) and how women occupying those seats should be selected (Uganda) (Koda and Shayo 1994: 11; Killian 2000). Others have disagreed over which women's interests should be prioritized. The South African Commission on Gender Equality, formed in 1996, found itself by 2000 embroiled in internal conflicts over how feminist concerns ought to be raised in the context of addressing racial and economic inequalities. Some wanted to privilege the interests of poor rural women, for whom issues like child support, job creation and access to water were paramount. Others, mindful of their urban educated feminist constituency, thought that the commission should be a site for 'theoretically-informed feminist challenges to gender hierarchy' and should not shy away

⑥ from taking up important yet controversial issues (Seidman 2001).

There have been debates over the utility of women's ministries in ensuring the adoption of feminist demands in government (South Africa) given that so many ministries were underfunded, understaffed and focused on women's domestic roles (Seidman 1999). Others have debated the utility of working within political parties, given their weakness and lack of interest in women's concerns. In some movements, there were debates over how to regard sex workers and whether to incorporate their demands into the women's movement. The spread of AIDS made these debates all the more contentious. Some have discussed the extent to which NGOs should be primarily accountable to the people they work with or to donors (Tsikata 1995: 11). Poor and educated professional women have differed over the need to tax women, the latter seeing tax payment as an obligation of equal citizenship, while poorer women resenting the additional burden. Women's right to land inheritance has also divided women. For some, their loyalties lay with their clan and the customary patrilineal practice in which properties of the deceased husband are claimed by his kin. Others see the right to own and inherit property as one that needs to be extended to women.

The expansion of educational opportunities since independence meant that there was a larger pool of university educated professional women in the new organizations. It was not uncommon to find tensions between the new professional women and the women in the women's wing of the ruling party, who tended to be less educated. Professional women often felt that the ruling party women did little to advance women's equality, while the leaders of the party organizations feared competition posed by the NGOs run by professional women, which manifested itself in conflicts over access to donor funds as well as other issues. Even among the professional women, there appeared to be emerging differences between an older generation of activists and the younger more radical activists who, while mindful and respectful of the older activists, would have liked to see a faster pace of change in the new organizations and were not afraid to embrace issues that had been virtually

taboo among the older generations such as abortion and lesbian rights. All these debates nevertheless fell along many lines based on levels of education, class, generation and urban vs. rural residence. Many of the debates reflected the transitions societies were undergoing with respect to gender relations.

## CONCLUSION

The most important change that occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s was the creation of autonomous organizations that began to challenge the stranglehold clientelism and state patronage had on women's mobilization in the post-independence period. The new autonomy allowed women to create organizations and forge alliances across ethnic, religious, clan, racial, rural-urban, generational and other divides. Associational autonomy made it possible for women's organizations to challenge corruption, injustice and their roots in clientelistic and patronage practices. It meant that they could freely select their own leaders, create their own agendas and pursue their own sources of funding. It helped women's organizations to expand their agendas from a focus on income-generating and welfare concerns to a more politicized agenda. It allowed women to broaden their demands to challenge the fundamental laws, structures, and practices that constrained them. Many for the first time took on issues like domestic violence, female genital cutting and rape that had been considered taboo in the past.

Nevertheless, the cultural and political challenges are far from over, and associational autonomy is constantly under threat. The lack of civil and political liberties and the ever present threat that political space will close in the semi-authoritarian African states poses serious constraints on women's movements. Yet, women are in movement in Africa and they have set in motion important and unprecedented societal transformations.

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