

Introduction

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Not many people in Kenya will openly identify themselves as being feminists. Indeed, the terms ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist’ in many African audiences evoke negative emotions in the minds of many with the pro-feminist running the risk of being shunned and isolated. Feminists are seen as people who behave differently and are in most instances caricatured in the constructed images depicting feminists. Not surprisingly therefore, feminism remains an emotive term even in academic institutions and generates much debate concerning its usefulness. When the word is used even in curricula, it almost always attracts a negative comment on the usefulness of the term and whether the more appropriate terminology to use is gender. There are those who hold that feminism is un-African and tailored to western societies.

Identifying oneself as a feminist is akin to ‘coming out of the closet of mainstream psychology into the bright terminologist world of pseudo science, ‘fad ideas’ and ‘personal politics’. It can be frightening as it symbolises rebellion and confrontation with ‘the other’ powerful and respected group which has all the ‘real science’ ‘legitimate ideas’ and value-free logic on their side. This is perhaps the greatest testimony that patriarchal systems of dominance and oppression are much stronger than one thinks. Women might find it a lot safer to ally themselves with ‘the accepted’ rather than oppose or react to “male-stream thought.” This tendency is all the more pervasive because the alternative “female-stream-thought” lacks established norms and idioms that one can readily call upon. Only when such norms are established and concretized can one understand and explain women’s experiences. The debate about feminism and patriarchy raises questions on the issue of whether women subordination is universal. If indeed it is, what are its common elements? Conversely, does patriarchy manifest itself differently in different societies or are there certain similarities that cut across time and place?

It is within this context that this journal focuses on different pathways through which feminism has been articulated in Africa. It proceeds from the premise that ‘a rose by any other name is still a rose’—hence, if feminism looks at the cause, incidence and consequences of women’s oppression, then it does exist in Africa whether we choose to refer to it as feminism or not. Feminism holds that women

suffer discrimination because of their sex; have specific needs which have been and remain negated and unsatisfied; and the satisfaction of these needs requires radical change/ revolution in the social, economic and political order. In a nutshell, feminists could be both men and women who seek to improve the situation and lives of women.

The papers in this journal address different concerns of women from different perspectives ranging from constitution-making to theology. The authors articulate the concerns of women in development, governance, politics as well as other domains. They seek to demonstrate the different pathways through which women have articulated their concerns. While it is up to the reader to determine whether the different pathways are expressions of African feminism, it is clear that women have a broad range of concerns and can harness different media to communicate these concerns. For instance, by telling their own stories, women have demonstrated that they are a legitimate source of information.