

Gendered Inequality: An African Challenge in the 21st Century

Patricia McFadden,

FES, Namibia - August, 2017

Introduction:

I would like to open with a statement by Pablo Solon, a Bolivian social activist, that:

'Since the beginning of the past century, various revolutionary movements have become the government in various countries. Although some of them have brought about important transformations, practically all have ultimately been co-opted by the logics of capitalism and power' (Salon.2017:31)

The challenge of achieving equality among all humans, and of creating and sustaining inclusive societies in this contemporary moment, faces each and every society, in its specifically historical context. Therefore, while this seminar will be concerning itself with issues of inequality and exclusion that range across the domains of identity, age, gender, working class resistance and organizing and the politics of the State in the 21st century, it should be the search for alternative social formations in both Africa and Europe which will distinguish the outcomes of the time spent in our host country, Namibia.

Gender, race, class, ability, and heteronormativity have become the dominant markers of human identity, and they are the most ubiquitous expressions of social and political differentiation everywhere. In Europe, the issues of migration have not only fractured an apparent sense of unity among the countries of the EU, but the very project of neoliberal unity is unable to contain the deep-seated contradictions within and among those societies as they struggle with the unfinished business of resolving the challenges of economic and social inequality surfaced by militarism within the Union almost a century ago, and having to reckon with the consequences of intervening in the crises of the Middle East. The recent lessons for the Left from the experiences of Syriza in Greece on the complexities of taking state power in the current European context, show, in the words of Andreas Karitzis, that *'we need a radical redesign of the 'Operating System' of the Left'* (Karitzis. 2017:29))

In Africa, the liberation/anti-colonial project has all but collapsed, with even those countries that had been expected to lead the way into a different future, floundering in a quagmire of various crises – economic, social, political and environmental (South Africa being a case in point), while the people have taken to the streets, where this is feasible, demanding the most basic rights and entitlements, often without any hope of creating the change that they so desperately need.

In most countries on the continent, the street has become a morgue and the people enter at their own peril. It is a dry, dark, season, with large numbers of African women, the aged, children and men, in flight – from countries like the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – entire families in public destitution, going

nowhere, as the State has collapsed and human precarity has taken on unimaginably tragic dimensions. The reality is dramatically told by the ruined lives of the majority of Africans, even though those at the helm of the State continue to believe the myths they have fabricated for themselves, about delivering the democratic dispensation to their people.

The larger truth is that across the world, working people, and women in the main, are paying the price for the compromises that leaders have made since the moment of the emergence of the State, as a socio-political infrastructure of the ruling classes and as a key site of power struggles over the resources and creativities of our various societies. Capitalism is fundamentally unyielding on the issues of profit and accumulation – no matter how they are dressed up - and regardless of the consequences, for those who cannot fend for themselves. Rosa Luxemburg's debate with Eduard Bernstein lies at the core of this persistent conundrum. (Luxemburg.1988)

In this vein, the noble ideal of Humanism, which set humans apart from other sentient beings based on the assumption that we have greater capacity to bring additional value to the communities of living species, has been irrevocably ruptured. As the environment and ecosystems reel in ecological crisis across the planet, and the devastating consequences of monolithic commodity production are felt in the explosion of 'life-style' diseases and conditions of un- wellness which are ironically affecting the most excluded communities, we know that the time for a critical and interrogative introspection of what we have become is at hand. It cannot be avoided.

Consequently, the desire for inclusion, fairness, dignity, and the preservation and celebration of human integrity, remain central to the ideological and policy narratives of progressives/left thinking and acting individuals and their organizations. Coming together in the spirit of the 'old' internationalism, a spirit and activism which cemented our relationships during times of resistance against wars and occupation in Europe and in Africa; the friendships and sense of comradeship which welded us together for over a century, will have to become a revitalizing source of political insight and shared concern, if the Left and progressives generally are to continue to claim a different political identity from the conservative and reactionary Right.

To paraphrase Hilary Wainwright, a radical feminist historian of people's struggles for democracy and socialism in Europe, ' *we need to emphasize the importance of memory, of critical memory...and think together about how we could reinforce the process of crowd-sourcing our collective history*' (Wainwright. 2016: 25)

Gendered Realities in Africa

My contribution seeks some clarity on the key challenges posed by gendered inequalities across the African continent, although I hasten to acknowledge that the exclusion of African women from all sites of social, economic, political, military and cultural power, albeit with minor individual exceptions, is not a peculiarity of this continent. Women have struggled against patriarchal exclusion and the violence and impunity which accompany these systems, in all societies, for millennia. (Lerner.1987; Mies.1987)

In recent times, there has been a growing acknowledgement among political parties and communities, that gendered inequality is undoubtedly central to understanding the complexities of social exclusion and its consequences for human dignity and wellbeing. This realization is largely the outcome of the radical work (in theoretical, intellectual and activist terms) of feminists across the globe, who for over a hundred years have crafted a specific lexicon of critical thinking tools, such as Gender, drawn from women's specific realities, to show the universality of patriarchy as a repressive system of male privilege, impunity and power. (Oakley. (2005);Gasa. (2007); Busby.(1993);Boyce Davies. (2008); Imam.(1997);Lowe Morna.(2004)

It is also evident that these critical feminist ideas and theories have begun to seep into more liberal and social democratic discourses on gendered inequality, as espoused in the work of scholars like Amartya Sen (Sen. (1990) and others, as well as in discourses and activities that are sponsored by the United Nations and by various bilateral and multilateral agencies. Therefore, there is no doubt that the theoretical and activist work of women across the world is beginning to create some shifts in the perceptions and attitudes about who women can be and or what they can become.

In the educational, legal, economic, intellectual, civil and political realms, the presence of women as agents of their own interests is becoming a fact that is acquiring a particular relevance in defining contemporary societies. The presence and contributions of women as socially active beings in the public does make the difference we need in all our societies. Gender is Political and the Political is Personal.

However, that is about all it amounts to at the present time.

Which brings me to the core question of why inequality and exclusion have proven to be so elusive and intractable, despite what often seem to be sincere attempts at inclusiveness on the part of those who control and define power in patriarchal, heteronormative ways? Policies and programs that appear intent on moving the barricades around sites of power for excluded communities like those of disabled persons, LGBTIQ, for example, invariably benefit an incoming sets of political players, and the landscape of status quo reactionary, repressive politics is repeatedly reiterated and re-entrenched, in cyclical waves of 'one step forward, three steps backward' to paraphrase Lenin.

Therefore – whether we are narrating the struggles for justice and a more secure reality in the Europe of the post inter-imperialist wars, or recollecting and interrogating the protracted struggles that the societies of the Majority South fought for their dignity and personhood, the scenario is the same – the wheel of history seems to be spinning in a backward direction.

The election of Donald Trump in the USA last November provides a quintessential example of this fundamentally reactionary 'swing of the pendulum' in modern history. We note that, across the board, various demands for social, political, economic and juridical inclusion by those who have tended to be 'left behind' when settlements were concluded between the negotiating parties, have been met with mild and largely rhetorical declarations (about citizenship, nationality, collective identity, and resource redistribution) which inevitably increase the wealth of the

miniscule class of ruling elites, and widen the gap between them and the vast majority of humans.

For women, and for African women in particular, **the Backlash** – that persistent pushing back of women into sites of male hegemony and privilege - is uncannily reminiscent of the essentially unchanged relationship between Africans and the former colonials, as the western multinational corporations and their governments continue to control the resource wealth and general orientation of African societies well into the second decade of the 21st century, in spite of the declarations of independence and partnership. (Fanon.(2004/1964); Sankara.(1988); Cabral. (1971); Alexander.(2002)

I want to draw parallels between the vacuity of gender-mainstreaming and the largely ineffectual state rhetoric as regards the entitlements of African citizens, because both come from the same ideological site – the compromise with capital and neoliberal principles.

Gender-mainstreaming, which was supposedly intended to level the playing field for females of all ages across the societies of the continent, and which has taken up an excessive amount of intellectual time, effort, resources and human agency, has resulted in a few middle class women serving largely as window dressing for a persistently male, nationalist politics. Where the numbers of women have been increased in parliaments, in political parties and on their electoral lists, as well as in the corporate boardrooms, these women basically represent their class interests as a newly emerging element in the burgeoning Black middle class. (Gouws.(2017); McFadden. (2007)

This has proved to be a brilliant strategic victory for neoliberal elites, and it speaks profoundly to the Gramscian notion of hegemony and the manipulation of civil society in the interests of the ruling classes. (Antonio Gramsci). However, the de-politicization of the civil society and the co-optation of many feminist intellectuals and gender activists into the national state as well as by United Nations system are having profound consequences on the public politics of all our societies.

On the one hand, former revolutionaries have become ‘captured by power’ and staying in power by any means, has become the most urgent task of all, while on the other hand civil society and the people’s movements find themselves stranded in the gap caused by the constraints placed on their activism as well as the collapse of their organizations.

The challenge then becomes that of counter-hegemony – how to craft the alternative politics within women’s movements and feminist collectives to ensure that the political autonomy of civil society organizations and their creativity, their ideas and theories of social transformation, do not become new insights for continued control by those who occupy State and who have lost the impetus of transformation by giving in to the logic of capital.

Responding to this challenge in a more inclusive and cooperative manner will provide both civil society activists and left state occupants with opportunities to initiate crucial strategies and programs so as to begin reversing the seemingly inevitable triumph of gendered and class power over well intentioned revolutionaries programs.

In the African context, I think it is essential to recognize and acknowledge that the existing relationship between the people and the State is both fractured and deeply flawed. It remains essentially a colonial and feudally inflected one. The gap between the people and the new ruling elites has become the most blatant expression of the failure of Nationalism to function as a contemporary, post-colonial ideology. And into this vacuum have leapt the archaic expressions of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism which are deepening the socio-political and cultural crises across the continent. This must be acknowledged before political parties can begin re-defining their relationships with the people and creating the new Alternative infrastructures of what will become contemporary African societies.

The interface of gendered violations and feudal continuities

Another critical gem that I have drawn from Gramsci's analysis of the State and society, and which I find deeply illuminating, is the dialectical interplay of continuity and rupture. I am aware that Gramsci applied this critical tool to the particularity of post-war Europe, (Gramsci on the *War of Positions*), but I think it has deep resonance in explaining some of the seemingly inexplicable capacities of repressive socio-cultural phenomena to transcend social formations and historical time. Of course we all know that Gramsci was a typically heteronormative male who said nothing about women, politically. In that sense, he was a man of his times.

Across the continent, one of the most devastating expressions of gendered inequality is experienced by females of all ages in the form of gendered violation. Embedded in the deepest recesses of male sexual identity and notions of manhood, and unabashedly defended as 'culture' and 'tradition' are the practices of misogyny and sexual impunity. The insistence that male control and ownership of women's bodies, creativities, labour and their very being is quintessentially '*African*', is a narrative that often shuts down any attempt at universalizing the most fundamental human rights that every person should be endowed with from the moment of birth. These are bodily and sexual integrity.

All sorts of rituals and rites of passage are called upon to back up this outrageously primitive claim that women become persons only through an unequal relationship with men – through lineage (fathers), heterosexual marriage (husbands), birthing sons (authenticity) and being inherited – the levirate (widowhood). How then do we begin to explain this blatant contradiction of inequality and exclusion, within a contemporary moment which is common across the continent?

I think that we have to dig deep into an explanation of what it is that underpins patriarchy as a system of privilege and power, in order to understand the meanings of *Supremacy* as the foundational anchor of multiple expressions of gendered, raced, classed, abelist and homophobic inequality and exclusion in our societies at the present time.

Supremacy as an ideology provides the core to a discourse that is narrated through cultural and social conventions and practices, languages and behaviors, and which provides the legitimating framework for the very essence of the heterosexual family – as the earliest site of gendered exclusion and violation. It also enables for the extension of these 'normalised' unequal practices

to become core elements of the institutions, policies and practices that define the State and present-day society.

It is supremacy, as an ideological prop, which enables privilege in the subjugation of other humans as ‘less than/other’ in relation to those who control the infrastructures of power. And such power is not only situated in the institutions and relationships that define the State; it is initially conceived of and crafted within the intimate context of the heterosexual family, with women as the first subjects of human subjugation and dehumanization.

Supremacy also allows for the practices of impunity – the allowance of behavior that is outside the boundaries of universally accepted modes of acceptable conduct – to be normalized through the guise of culturally authenticating norms and roles. Among the various exercises of impunity as ‘*cultural expression*’ are two examples that are particularly humiliating and dehumanizing to young women – abduction and virginity testing. The State, generally, turns a blind eye to this bodily and sexual violation of women’s rights, allowing impunity to become normalized and hidden in the very fabric of people’s daily lives.

It is this impunity as the exercise of unsanctioned power over those who have been flung outside the realm of humanness; who have no bodily or sexual integrity; who can only become visible through a sexualized, commodified relationship with males –which underpins the rampancy of rape and astounding displays of brutal hegemonic masculinity in supposedly normal community settings, and indescribable situations of total disregard of women as persons in situations of conflict and war across the landscapes of the continent.

Clearly African men will have to re-construct their masculinities and form the movements through which they can begin to teach themselves new notions and practices of manhood, notions that reject patriarchal privilege, supremacy and impunity, so as to enhance their relationships with women and explore choices that go beyond the constraints of heterosexuality.

As long as pre-capitalist infrastructures of authoritarianism and autocracy are retained and sustained, especially within the rural settings of the continent, where the majority of working people, most of whom are women, reside, the seemingly intractable problems of exclusion and inequality, particularly gendered inequality and the brutalization and wanton killing of women will persist.

Life in the rural spaces of the continent, which are often romanticized as ‘home’, is dire and generally cruel for women. Land, the very source of their existence, remains largely inaccessible because both the unresolved colonial land question and the lack of personhood stand between these women and their creative abilities to build sufficient livelihoods for themselves and their communities.

It is in challenging these patriarchal collusions, and in crafting inclusive policies and programs – the kind that Thomas Sankara so courageously sought to implement in Burkina Faso, which resulted in his early demise, that we can initiate the alternative social formations wherein gendered equality redefines all human relationships.

Conclusion:

What are the new ways of living as contemporary Africans and Europeans which will enable for more humanistic and dignified livelihoods for all people in our societies? What does the new Socialism mean in the current context of globalised financial capitalism and the expansion of militarism onto the bodies and lives of unarmed, non-combatant citizens? What are the contradictions that the new technologies are posing for us all in ethical and rights terms? When will we actually respond in effective ways to the onslaught that is being wrecked on our ecosystems and environments, and center the issues of planetary survival in our political agendas? How and what can we learn from the numerous examples of left political parties that have entered the state and failed largely because they become versions of the very rulers they sought to overthrow?

These challenges also lie at the heart of a new, contemporary feminism in Africa and internationally as Nationalism is eclipsed (in Africa) and or revived (in the USA and across Europe), highlighting the urgency and contingency of new realities and the search for the new Commons and inclusive notions of productive democracy and wellbeing. For me personally this is a great time to be left, radical, feminist and futurist.

References:

- Alexander, N (2002) – *An Ordinary Country*, (South Africa: University of Kwa-Zulu Press)
- Boyce Davies, C (2008) – *Left of Karl Marx*, (Durham/London: Duke University Press)
- Busby, M (ed) (1993) – *Daughters of Africa*, (London: Vintage Books)
- Cabral, A (1971) – *Revolution in Guinea: an African People's Struggle*, (London: The Prinkipo Press)
- Fanon, F (2004) – *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press)
- Fanon, F (1964) – *Toward the African Revolution*, (New York: Grove Press)
- Gasa, N (ed) (2007) – *Women in South African History*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press)
- Gouws, A (2017) – ‘*Pros and Cons of the three women running for South Africa's Presidency*’ in *The Conversation*, August,
- Gramsci, A (1971) – *Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Books)
- Imam, A, et al (eds) (1997) – *Engendering African Social Sciences*, (Dakar/Senegal: CODESRIA Press)
- Karitzis, A (2017) – ‘*The Left in Power: what can we learn from the case of Syriza?*’ *Amandla*, *ibid*

- Lerner, G (1987) – *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (London: Oxford University Press)
- Lowe Morna, C (2004) – *Ringling Up the Changes: Gender in Southern African Politic*, (Johannesburg: DS Print Media)
- Luxemburg, R (1970) – *Reform or Revolution*, (New York: Pathfinder)
- McFadden, P (2011) – ‘*Re-crafting Citizenship in the Postcolonial Moment: a focus on Southern Africa*’ in *Works and Days Journal*, 57/58, Vol. 29, Hamilton College, New York
- Mies, M (1987) – *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*,(London: ZED Books)
- Oakley.A (2005) – *The Ann Oakley Reader: gender, women and social science*, (UK: Policy Press)
- Sankara, T (1988) – *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, (South Africa: Kwela Press)
- Sen, A (1999) – *Development as Freedom*, (New York: Anchor Books)
- Solon, P (2017) – ‘*Some thoughts, self-criticisms and proposals concerning the process of change in Bolivia*’, *Amandla*, Issue No. 51, March
- Wainwright, H (2016) in *The New Politics Research Agenda Workshop Report*, Amsterdam,
- Wainwright, H (2003) - *Reclaim the State: experiments in Popular Democracy*, (London/NY:Verso)