



# Feminist Activist Leadership

**Overview:** This activity is designed to help inform and broaden participant's reflections on feminist movement building and the principles that underpin feminist activist leadership by sharing insights from the African Feminist Charter.

**Purpose:** The reading and discussion of the African Feminist Charter is especially useful to engage women in a deeper analysis and understanding of feminism and feminist leadership. It is best applied in conjunction with or after activities that examine feminism and feminist leadership.

**Time:** 2 hours

- 1 hour: Individual reading and reflection
- 1 hour: Group discussion

**Credit:** JASS SNA, African Feminist Charter was developed by the African Feminist Forum

**Materials:**

- Flip chart
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Handout: Copies of The Africa Feminist Charter

**Process:**

*Facilitation Note: You can do this activity in a variety of ways. In order to maximize its impact, you might want to assign the Charter for independent reading and reflection, probably the night before you plan to hold the discussion. Participants could do this individually or in groups.*



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***In Plenary:***

Introduce purpose and process, highlighting how our views and understanding of leadership affect our behaviors and how few alternative models exist beyond the top-down approaches that have been shaped by sexism and patriarchy. In different parts of the world women activists and feminists have been looking to develop their own analysis and ideas. The African Feminist Charter, when used as a basis for discussion, provides a way to examine some of these important issues.

***Individually or in Small Groups:***

Provide participants with the Charter for reading and review; ask them to:

- Identify the two ideas that stand out for them as being important to feminist activist leadership.
- Be prepared to explain what issue or problem those ideas were trying to address.

***In Plenary:***

- On the day of the discussion session, start by asking participants to share 1 or 2 of their insights.
- You or your co-facilitator record ideas on flip chart.
- Probe more deeply, asking participants what links or connections they see between the African Feminist Charter and other related discussions or experiences they have had -- for example other activities related to principles, definitions or qualities of feminist activist leadership or personal experiences in leadership positions. You highlight those links and connections and add any others that seem important.

***In buzz groups of 2 or 3:***

Have groups consider:

- *What 2 or 3 ideas from the Charter are fundamental to your visions and approaches to leadership?*
- *Are there any ideas that you disagree with or don't understand?*
- *How would you put principles from the Charter into practice?*

***In Plenary:***

- Have groups share responses; Ideas are recorded on flip chart.



- Conclude with questions like these: *What other insights or comments does the Charter or these ideas bring to mind? Any concluding points or comments?*
- Summarize key points, emphasizing the need for new models and visions of leadership that reflect feminist values of equality, dignity and justice among others and that the Charter provides an important step in that process to be built upon and refined.

**Option:** *You can encourage the formation of a working group to take the flip chart material and develop a set of their own Principles for Feminist Activist Leadership which can then be submitted to the entire group for further refinement.*



## Support Material

### Handout: The African Feminist Charter

Developed by The African Feminist Forum

#### INTRODUCTION

The African Feminist Forum took place from 15<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> November 2006 in Accra, Ghana. The meeting brought together over 100 feminist activists from all over the region and the diaspora. The space was crafted as an autonomous space in which African feminists from all walks of life, at different levels of engagement within the feminist movement such as mobilizing at local levels for women's empowerment to academia, could reflect on a collective basis and chart ways to strengthen and grow the feminist movement on the continent.

A key outcome of the forum was the adoption of the **Charter of Feminist Principles**, which was agreed by the Regional Working group for the Forum, to be one of its principle aims. It was felt that we need something to help us define and affirm our commitment to feminist principles, which will guide our analysis, and practice. As such the Charter sets out the collective values that we hold as key to our work and to our lives as African feminists. It charts the change we wish to see in our communities, and also how this change is to be achieved. In addition, it spells out our individual and collective responsibilities to the movement and to one another within the movement.

With this Charter, we reaffirm our commitment to dismantling patriarchy in all its manifestations in Africa. We remind ourselves of our duty to defend and respect the rights of all women, without qualification. We commit to protecting the legacy of our feminist ancestors who made numerous sacrifices, in order that we can exercise greater autonomy.

The Charter is an inspirational as well as an aspirational document. Mechanisms for operationalising were also drawn up at the meeting. Key recommendations were:

- The dissemination and popularization of the Charter as a critical movement building tool. This requires such inputs as, translation of the charter into as many languages as possible, communication of the charter through different mediums such as radio, websites, television, and so on.



- The Charter was viewed by many as an accountability mechanism for feminist organizing. As such it was recommended that it be developed into a tool that women's organizations can use for monitoring the own institutional development as well as peer review with other feminists.

## CHARTER OF FEMINIST PRINCIPLES FOR AFRICAN FEMINISTS

### PREAMBLE

#### NAMING OURSELVES AS FEMINISTS

We define and name ourselves publicly as Feminists because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognize that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves Feminist places us in a clear ideological position. By naming ourselves as Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists. We are African women – we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with “*ifs,*” “*Buts,*” or “*However.*” We are Feminists. Full stop.

#### OUR UNDERSTANDING OF FEMINISM AND PATRIARCHY

As African feminists our understanding of feminism places patriarchal social relations structures and systems which are embedded in other oppressive and exploitative structures at the center of our analysis. Patriarchy is a system of male authority which legitimizes the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious and military institutions. Men's access to, and control over resources and rewards within the private and public sphere derives its legitimacy from the patriarchal ideology of male dominance. Patriarchy varies in time and space, meaning that it changes over time, and varies according to class, race<sup>1</sup>, ethnic, religious and global-imperial relationships and structures. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Note by JASS: The words “race” and “racism” have different meanings and connotations in different contexts. Discussions and interpretations of race and racism are not the same in Mesoamerica, Africa or North America. Nonetheless, it's important to acknowledge that race and racism have social and political realities that movements need to address in their analysis and action.



in the current conjunctures, patriarchy does not simply change according to these factors, but is inter-related with and informs relationships of class, race, ethnic, religious, and global-imperialism. Thus to challenge patriarchy effectively also requires challenging other systems of oppression and exploitation, which frequently mutually support each other.

Our understanding of Patriarchy is crucial because it provides for us as feminists, a framework within which to express the totality of oppressive and exploitative relations which affect African women. Patriarchal ideology enables and legitimizes the structuring of every aspect of our lives by establishing the framework within which society defines and views men and women and constructs male supremacy. Our ideological task as feminists is to understand this system and our political task is to end it. Our focus is fighting against patriarchy as a system rather than fighting individual men or women. Therefore, as feminists, we define our work as investing individual and institutional energies in the struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation.

## OUR IDENTITY AS AFRICAN FEMINISTS

As Feminists who come from/work/live in Africa, we claim the right and the space to be Feminist and African. We recognize that we do not have a homogenous identity as feminists - we acknowledge and celebrate our diversities and our shared commitment to a transformatory agenda for African societies and African women in particular. This is what gives us our common feminist identity.

Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our past as a continent – diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonization, liberation struggles, neo-colonialism, globalization, etc. Modern African States were built off the backs of African Feminists who fought alongside men for the liberation of the continent. As we craft new African States in this new millennium, we also craft new identities for African women, identities as full citizens, free from patriarchal oppression, with rights of access, ownership and control over resources and our own bodies and utilizing positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways. We also recognize that our pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial histories and herstories require special measures to be taken in favour of particular African women in different contexts.

We acknowledge the historical and significant gains that have been made by the African Women's Movement over the past forty years, and we make bold to lay claim to these gains as African feminists – they happened because **African Feminists** led the way, from the grassroots level and up; they strategised, organized, networked, went on strike and marched in protest, and did the research, analysis, lobbying, institution building and all that it took for States, employers and institutions to acknowledge women's personhood.



As African feminists, we are also part of a global feminist movement against patriarchal oppression in all its manifestations. Our experiences are linked to that of women in other parts of the world with whom we have shared solidarity and support over the years. As we assert our space as African feminists, we also draw inspiration from our feminist ancestors who blazed the trail and made it possible to affirm the rights of African women. As we invoke the memory of those women whose names are hardly ever recorded in any history books, we insist that it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported into Africa from the West. We reclaim and assert the long and rich tradition of African women's resistance to patriarchy in Africa. We henceforth claim the right to theorize for ourselves, write for ourselves, strategise for ourselves and speak for ourselves as African feminists.

## INDIVIDUAL ETHICS

As individual feminists, we are committed to and believe in gender equality based on feminist principles which are:

- The indivisibility, inalienability and universality of women's human rights
- The effective participation in building and strengthening progressive African feminist organizing and networking to bring about transformatory change.
- A spirit of feminist solidarity and mutual respect based on frank, honest and open discussion of difference with each other.
- The support, nurture, and care of other African feminists, along with the care for our own well-being.
- The practice of non-violence and the achievement of non-violent societies.
- The right of all women to live free of patriarchal oppression, discrimination and violence.
- The right of all women to have access to sustainable and just livelihoods as well as welfare provision, including quality health care, education, water and sanitation.
- Freedom of choice and autonomy regarding bodily integrity issues, including reproductive rights, abortion, sexual identity and sexual orientation.
- A critical engagement with discourses of religion, culture, tradition and domesticity with a focus on the centrality of women's rights.



- The recognition and presentation of African women as the subjects not the objects of our work, and as agents in their lives and societies.
- The right to healthy, mutually respectful and fulfilling personal relationships.
- The right to express our spirituality within or outside of organized religions.
- The acknowledgment of the feminist agency of African women which has a rich *Herstory* that has been largely undocumented and ignored.

## INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS

As feminist organisations, we commit to the following:

- Advocating for openness, transparency, equality and accountability in feminist- led institutions and organisations.
- Affirming that being a feminist institution is not incompatible with being professional, efficient, disciplined and accountable.
- Insisting on and supporting African women's labour rights, including egalitarian governance, fair and equal remuneration and maternity policies.
- Using power and authority responsibly, and managing institutional hierarchies with respect for all concerned. We believe that feminist spaces are created to empower and uplift women. At no time should we allow our institutional spaces to degenerate into sites of oppression and undermining of other women.
- Exercising responsible leadership and management of organisations whether in a paid or unpaid capacity and striving to uphold critical feminist values and principles at all times.
- Exercising accountable leadership in feminist organisations, taking into consideration the needs of others for self-fulfillment and professional development. This includes creating spaces for power-sharing across-generations.
- Creating and sustaining feminist organisations to foster women's leadership. Women's organizations and networks should be led and managed by women. It is a contradiction of feminist leadership principles to have men leading, managing and being spokespersons for women's organizations.



- Feminist organisations as models of good practice in the community of civil society organizations, ensuring that the financial and material resources mobilised in the name of African women are put to the service of African women and not diverted to serve personal interests. Systems and structures with appropriate Codes of Conduct to prevent corruption and fraud, and to manage disputes and complaints fairly, are the means of ensuring institutionalized within our organizations.
- Striving to inform our activism with theoretical analysis and to connect the practice of activism to our theoretical understanding of African feminism.
- Being open to critically assessing our impact as feminist organizations, and being honest and proactive with regards to our role in the movement.
- Opposing the subversion and/or hijacking of autonomous feminist spaces to serve right wing, conservative agendas.
- Ensuring that feminist non-governmental or mass organisations are created in response to real needs expressed by women that need to be met, and not to serve selfish interests, and unaccountable income-generating agendas.

## FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

As leaders in the feminist movement, we recognize that feminist agency has popularized the notion of women as leaders. As feminist leaders we are committed to making a critical difference in leadership, based on the understanding that the quality of women's leadership is even more important than the numbers of women in leadership. We believe in and commit ourselves to the following:

- Disciplined work ethics guided by integrity and accountability at all times
- Expanding and strengthening a multi-generational network and pool of feminist leaders across the continent
- Ensuring that the feminist movement is recognised as a legitimate constituency for women in leadership positions.
- Building and expanding our knowledge and information base on an ongoing basis, as the foundation for shaping our analysis and strategies and for championing a culture of learning beginning with ourselves within the feminist movement.



- Nurturing, mentoring and providing opportunities for young feminists in a non-matronising manner
- Crediting African women's labour, intellectual and otherwise in our work.
- Creating time to respond in a competent, credible and reliable manner to other feminists in need of solidarity and support whether political, practical or emotional.
- Being open to giving and receiving peer reviews and constructive feedback from other feminists

**The African Feminist Charter was developed by the African Feminist Forum, hosted by the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF).**

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