

Women's voices, men's silence

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This article explores the persuasiveness of women's rights activists in Africa and proposes ways in which activists can counter the silence of men when it comes to these issues.

Are human rights enough?

In the past few days I got to thinking a lot about women's rights. I wondered why it seemed that advocacy for women's rights fell short of the greater public's sympathy. These musings began after a workshop I attended in Johannesburg, where different civil society organisations had come together to discuss various human rights issues in South Africa. I quickly noticed a certain "silence" by the men in attendance when it came to the session on "women's rights". The men in the room suddenly had no or little contribution to make. Taking these men as representative of other men outside of the workshop, I began to ponder about

this as one of the problems facing women's rights work. It was a kind of apathy; misunderstanding; and a kind of vagueness as to what men in Africa really think about the rights of women.

The why's of men's silence

I asked myself a couple of questions, to which I could not reach satisfactory answers. *Why were men quiet? Was it because they did not have the lived experience of being women? Did they not really understand what women's rights were? Was it socialised in them not to make an effort to understand women? Were women's issues too complicated for them to even begin to contribute to the discussions?*

Human rights approach? Hmm, maybe not enough for Africa

Despite not having all the answers, I realised for the first time a conceptual flaw within human rights based advocacy. While reference to the Constitution and other human rights instruments was important, it failed to acknowledge that women's issues stemmed from sociological and psychological realms and were not simply issues of a legal and political nature. It appeared that human rights discourse (as was the impression in this meeting) tended to perceive and portray women as a homogenous vulnerable unit. This manner of speaking about women's rights made activists prone to spiralling into the discourse of victimhood without linking these to extra-legal solutions within African cultures and religions. And while it is true that women become victim to harmful practices and patriarchal beliefs, sensitivity to rights violations was not uniform for all women. As such, advocacy related to women's rights ought to begin from the point of view that not everyone knows why women and not men should have specific rights allocated to them.

Some good practices outside the scope of human rights law

* In a decent African nuclear family, women have the powerful role of raising children and bringing order to the home. In fact, without a woman in the home, a home is seen as incomplete. One African saying, “A home is a woman”, alludes to this.

* In some African traditions, a woman who has been hit by her husband can consult with her family to mediate in the situation.

* In some cultures, in South Africa and Malawi for example, women can be chiefs. Rwanda has set a global example by having the highest number of women in parliament in the world.

Given these few examples, is it evident that there are some positive practices compatible with human rights law within African culture, which can be used as reference for both men and women when advocating for women’s rights and igniting voices among the men who relate to these good cultural practices. A practical example is that of [Malawian female chief Theresa Kachindamoto](#) , who is reported to have terminated about 850 child marriages in the country

The bad...

Despite the good practices mentioned, Africa remains strongly patriarchal. One example that illustrates this is the [recent comment](#) by the president of Nigeria who said his wife belonged in his “kitchen, living room or the other room.” This was following the public criticism of the president’s leadership by the first lady, Aisha Buhari. In this instance, “men’s silence” revealed itself through another form. Some men commented on social media that Mrs. Buhari should not have criticised her husband in public. These men’s silence was in commenting on the legitimacy of Mrs. Buhari’s comments. To them it was not about the human right to free expression but about safeguarding a man’s respect. Surely, it would take a cultural argument phrased perhaps based on “public interest” and on the idea of a woman as a critical figure in facilitating a harmonious relationship between the president and the public.

Contradictions in advocacy

Back to the workshop! Because women have different life experiences and most men have socialised patriarchal lenses on life, it is difficult to bring harmony to women’s demands when it comes to rights. Contradictions related to prioritisation and strategy are notable. For instance, when one woman mentioned the issue of prostitution due to socioeconomic inequality, I could hear with my mental ear, men responding, “But that is her choice.” When the possibility of polyandry was mentioned, again I heard, “It’s impossible – women do not have the need to marry many men.” When women complained about cat-calling as a behaviour in which men projected feelings of ownership over women, I could imagine men misunderstanding this and asking themselves, “So how are we supposed to court women?” When one woman said she did not think it was appropriate for men to attend Women’s Day celebrations, this was a contradiction to what another woman had said about involving men in women’s projects. But, when women spoke about the need to provide free sanitary towels for disadvantaged girls, or the call for men to stop violence against women, I imagined everyone in the room being in agreement.

Recommendations

With all the above I summarise as follows;

- When tackling and communicating women's rights in Africa, there needs to be a deliberate effort to involve both men and women whose view of the world condones patriarchy. As men are often perpetrators of sexual violence, emotional abuse of women and physical violence, there needs to be a direct strategy to get men talking about their indifference when it comes to issues that concern women.
- In order for women's issues to be persuasive, activists must find and complement human rights discourse with best practices from African culture and religion so as to align women's rights with socio-cultural realities. Not doing so makes these discussions unrelatable and a form of cultural usurpation.
- Finally, when activists speak about women's rights they must categorise these issues between matters of an ideological nature (e.g. polyandry) and issues of imminent concern, such as the provision of sanitary pads as a way of preventing absenteeism from school, the sexual health of women and girls, and ending all violence against women. (Organisations such as APC can begin to initiate databases per country to populate statistical information about the common violations against women in order to assist activists to make compelling arguments which persuade everyone to engage.)