

**Address by Mrs Tsitsi Dangarembga at the 2017 International Women's Day Commemorative Discussion – UNISA Campus, Ormonde, Johannesburg: March 10, 2017.**

WOMEN ACTIVISM IN AFRICA: Is Feminism Divisive, unAfrican and anti-Black? Debunking the Myth.

**Introduction**

Good evening. It is my honour and pleasure to be here today, courtesy of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation's recognition of International Women's Day. I say a big thank you to the Foundation for bringing me to Johannesburg and bringing me together with yourselves and the amazing people that I met at dinner last night at the Foundation. I thank all of you for giving up your time to be here because you are passionate about activism, about women and about Africa and about what happens when we put those three together.

I think one of the reasons why I am here this evening, to speak is that I've dedicated a fair amount of my professional life to issues that affect women and being an African woman myself to issues that affect African women. I am pleased that we are talking specifically about African women's activism because that is a specification, which in my mind is not made often enough. Too often we talk generally about women, women's development, women's this, women's that and in this context African women end up with the status of the poor sister. I know this does not sound very cheerful, but I came to a conclusion that surprised me as I went over material in preparation for this evening. This conclusion is that African women's activism is alive and kicking.

**Definition of Activism**

What am I talking about when I say African women's activism? I think African women's activism can be a perplexing and sometimes even threatening concept for people who are not engaged with this activism as their core business. Each of the concepts in that phrase, African Women's Activism is huge, so let me begin towards a definition by breaking the term down.

A definition of activism of activism that I find useful is the following:

Activism is vigorous actions carried out in an effort to promote, impede or re-direct social, political, economic and or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society.

This definition is a combination of several others, such as:

1. Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society.
2. the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals
3. A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action, especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue

### **Activism as action**

You'll see that in combining these definitions, I prefer to emphasise action rather than doctrine. In fact, not only action, but actions. For me this implies that activism is something ongoing and not once off event. By emphasising action, I also take activism out of the realm of the theoretical into the practical. Theory may be necessary for the planning of activism, but activism itself requires practice.

Another important aspect of activism is that the actions have to be vigorous. The requirement for vigorous action brings us to the requirement for commitment when engaging in activism. I'm going to show you a little trailer that illustrates what I mean when I say there can be no activism without commitment. It is the trailer to the film SUFFRAGETTES that one of the organisations I work with called Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe prepared for the International Images Film Festival for Women. This is a festival that screens inspiring films about women, and we do this so vigorously that we have been working in six countries and it will soon be seven or eight. It is the festival trailer. So it's advertising the festival as well as the film. But I think you will still be able to see that I mean by commitment.

The commitment of the women involved was so strong that they were willing to suffer imprisonment in order to enable women to obtain the vote. Did you pick up the scene with the horse racing? In that scene a woman actually throws herself in front of the King of England's horse for the cause. That was the decisive event that began the trajectory towards the establishment of the women's vote. To engage with the powers that consolidate the status quo half-heartedly is to concede defeat before one has begun.

### **Activism as public action**

One aspect of activism that is not made clear in definitions in common usage, is the way in which activism must take place publicly. If the action itself is not public, it must at least be directed towards agents who act in the public domain. For example, one may attend a demonstration as a public act, or one may write to an MP or other person in public office.

### **Activism as service to society**

The third point that is worth emphasising in the definition above is that activism is carried out in the service of society. Activism always has as its aim the betterment of society. The challenge is often to make people understand that the successful outcome of activism is positive change for all of society.

### **Women's Activism**

So that is activism. What then is women's activism? Following on from the previous definition it follows that women's activism is the activism of women to improve society. Looked at like this, it becomes clear that women's activism includes improving society for women as part of the process of improving society for all, but it is not limited to this. Women's activism should engage with all areas of life where improvement is needed.

### **Women's activism and Feminism**

Many definitions equate women's activism to feminism. However, I perceive three differences between women's activism and feminism.

First is the matter of theory versus practice. Feminism is in one sense broader than women's activism because it encompasses theoretical engagement.

Because activism is focused on action, however, it is possible to have feminists who are not activists.

Secondly, feminism may be private whereas activism must have a public dimension. For example, there is something called a feminist charter. This charter lays out the principles that feminists must abide by in their personal lives. By signing on to this charter one becomes a self-confessed feminist. Yet it is possible that nobody but the woman herself, and the group she belongs to will know that the woman is a feminist if she wishes to keep this secret.

The third difference between women's activism and feminism is – and I hope this does not disappoint anybody; it is not intended to – that men may be feminists in that they identify with the goals, values and belief system of feminism. However, by virtue of the fact that they are not women they cannot be women activists themselves. At best, as feminists, they can be allies of women activists.

### **Women's activism and dominant discourses**

Related to the matter of theory versus practice is the question of discourse.

When we engage with any concept at a theoretical level, we must be very careful to remember that theory is always generated in a particular knowledge system. As women activists, we have to ask ourselves, what knowledge system is our conceptual framework generated from? What are the values of this system? How do these values, that we ourselves are socialised into, affect the ways in which we can think about anti-patriarchy, pro-society activities? Where are our thoughts affected, how does this manifest in the activities we engage in?

Here's an example of what I mean here. Last night I attended a wonderful dinner at the Thabo Mbeki Foundation where at least three, perhaps even four generations of women activists were gathered. Younger women expressed their desire that the group continue to meet after this initiative. At least one older woman explained that in her youth motivation had remained high because women had met in that manner every week. I know that as a young woman, I also grew a lot and found a lot of strength in regular solidarity meetings. The era we older women activists were groomed in was the 1960s through to the

1980s. That was a time when socialist theory and practice seemed like a real alternative for society. The practice of regular meetings was common to both feminism and socialism. Now the cold war is said to be over and we know that socialism as it was practised is not a real alternative for society. Individualistic capitalism is the global system.

Feminists and women's activists seemed to have absorbed this liberal discourse, for, as the young feminists say, the kinds of solidarity meetings enjoyed by earlier generations of women are not held sufficiently regularly today.

It is essential that women who are working for positive social change for all be sufficiently self-reflective individually and collectively so as to allow for examining how their thought and therefore their practice has been shaped and styled by the very system that brought their discourse and praxis into being. Where this is not done erroneous theoretical underpinnings can lead to erroneous actions that benefit neither women nor society. At worst a situation can develop in which those who are generating theory are completely out of touch with the women who are on the ground carrying out activism.

Another effect of the dominant discourses on women's behaviour in the realm of women's activism is what I call the dependency syndrome. When there are men around, women will often simply give up on a task defined as male, without trying to carry it out themselves. I saw this as a young woman and I still see it today with the young women I work with. I'll give you a couple of examples.

As a young woman, the women's group I belonged to decided to portray the struggle of women in drama. Agit-prop community theatre was being promoted in Zimbabwe at the time and we women thought we would use it for our own purposes. As I had written and produced a couple of plays at the university, I was selected to be a member of the drama team. We also had some men working with. My learning curve went up steeply when one of the women who was in the implementing group with me turned to one of the men and said please, help us, we don't know how to do this. My memory of the situation beyond that is blank. I am not sure whether I even continued the project. As I remember it, we had hardly begun the work of excavating a woman's life and women themselves were already giving up on the work. Women. African women. Giving up.

It was this experience that prompted me to join a women's film organisation many years later in Zimbabwe. The idea was that it would be a safe place for women to learn the technical, narrative and aesthetic skills of film-making. However, we found young men applying to be interns and decided to introduce a quota system for men. Up until today, if we have a male intern there, the women will go to the man and ask him to do the most simple of jobs such as connecting the projector. They are quite content to sit there and implement programmes and write proposals. I still can't comprehend it. It is a syndrome women's activism has to engage with.

### **The public component of women's activism**

Let me return now to the issue of the public component of women's activism, which may be lacking in feminism. Why would a woman want to sign on to a charter and yet wish to keep the signing on secret? The answer is fear. Why would a woman indicate her belief in a system that equates the sexes, but fail to engage in any public action that propagates that belief. The answer again is fear. I think fear can also account for why women will often not exert themselves in a task seen traditionally as male, if men are around. Fear or laziness. But we do also know from psychology that fear can have a paralysing effect on an individual and thus it can present as laziness.

There are various types of fear that cause women to underperform. One type is the fear of being censured by society or by a significant other if one goes over the limits prescribed by gender norms. Another fear is the fear of failure. This is a very strong fear, as failing at a task that society did not expect her to engage in in the first place opens a woman up not to sympathy but to great ridicule.

The antidote for the above effects of dominant social relations beings with powerful conversations. That is why spaces such as this one this evening are so important. The remedy to the fear is creation of safe spaces combined with strengthening confidence through transfer of skills both conceptual and practical in the areas of endeavour in question.

I would like to show you what I mean. In 1988 I was asked to write the story for a film on widow's rights. The film was subsequently produced. It is called NERIA. Have a look at the trailer.

What strikes you about this trailer? Anybody. Well, for me one of the most amazing things is that although the trailer says the film is about Neria, she does not speak until one minute and ten seconds have elapsed. Added to that, the voice that tells us about Neria is male. And in the end, when she does speak, it is to beg to be left alone. What's more we see that her fight is not for herself and her rights as a widow, but for the well-being of her children. This trailer amounts to multiple erasure while purporting to give Neria agency.

Eight years later, as I was completing my film education, I made another film with the same organisation run by a white, non-Zimbabwean male. I co-wrote the script with him and another white male. You won't be surprised to see that their names are first on the script credit and I am last, although they had failed to write it and had to call me in. Anyway, you will observe how skills transfer and conceptual engagement helped me to give the female character in this film, EVERYONE'S CHILD significantly more agency.

### **African women's Agency**

Now I going to turn to the question of African women's activism. I spoke earlier of the matter of dominant ideologies of when I looked at women's activism. We need to ask the question, as African women's activists: Are there any dominant ideologies that divide us into different groups of women that affect how we identify with each other as African women? Beyond the patriarchal ideology of gender, we have the capitalist ideology of class, and the colonial ideology of imperialism acting normatively to separate us as one group of African women from another group of African women. Other such ideologies are the systems of thought surrounding religion, sexual preference, age, skin colour and other physical presentation, culture and so forth. The ideologies of the nation state and the political party are ideologies that increasingly impact our lives in divisive ways that do not contribute to the well-being of society.

As African women activists we have to be intimately informed about the nature of such divisive ideologies and how they operate in our lives from the systemic level down to the individual level. Engaging with these issues can quite literally

be a matter of life and death. We know that the ideologies surrounding can be deadly. For example, these ideologies have led to women being killed because they did not wear the right length skirt or because they did not cook a certain dish in a certain manner. And at the same time that a man kills a woman in this way, something dies in him also.

Beyond the ideology of gender, though, other divisive ideologies can be just as lethal. Capitalist ideologies of class make it all right for a women like myself to pay for a private obstetrician, while a woman without any meaningful access to resources dies because her husband beat her up to the point of abortion and she could not obtain the required D&C to clean out her uterus. While this is happening, I normalise this situation by saying my own hands are full; there is nothing I can do help such a woman.

### **Conclusion**

Examples of the lethal nature of divisive discourse are endless. I don't want to depress us by giving an example for each of the ideologies that I have mentioned, so I will end with the examples I have already given. The last point I want to make this evening, is that for me, as a middle class woman, to tell myself that I cannot do anything about the suffering of a woman from another class is a narrative. Narrative is the carrier of discourse. It carries discourse that has come from somewhere. All my experience compels me to believe that as Africans we have ignored narrative at our own peril. Consciousness, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

Those with the means of filling consciousness will fill it up with contents in their own interests. We cannot be successful if we do not appropriate the means of filling up consciousness for ourselves. This requires the generation of knowledge, the packaging of this knowledge in narrative that can be engaged within and across the different groupings I have mentioned. We cannot afford to leave anybody out. Leaving people out, whoever they are, merely leads to the kind of alienation that results in conflict.



Coming to this realisation, I concluded that African women activists need a complete paradigm shift. We have to be equally concerned about how we act with men, as with how we work to empower women. We have to be equally concerned about how we collaborate with the rural woman, the urban disadvantaged woman as with how we maintain our livelihoods within our class bubble.

We have to be equally concerned with how we can hold powerful non-confrontational, healing conversations with women of different religious persuasions, sexual preference or racial or background as with how we can have such conversations amongst ourselves. I put it to you that the whole binary upon which feminism as a discipline is grounded is patriarchal and yet feminism is one of the conceptual frameworks that informs women's activism. I put it to you also that the system of distributing resources on which African women's activism mostly depends is imperial and so cannot work to dismantle the very inequalities upon which it is based. The work of generating knowledge, packaging it as narrative and distributing it to the world is resource heavy.

This is the issue that is now increasingly being referred to as financial inclusion, although the reality is that we live in a system of financial apartheid. African women activists have to find a way to acquire the resources we need for this work, otherwise while our activism will remain alive and kicking, but without enjoying the success that is necessary for it to contribute significantly in saving our continent.

Thank you.