16 | Moving the personal to the political: personal struggles as a basis for social justice advocacy

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This chapter is deeply personal and represents a personal trajectory, a discovery, of sorts, of what influences and accordingly grounds my advocacy in social justice. Inevitably, the exploration is neither smooth nor straightforward, as I allow the process to evolve, building on insights in order to draw meaning. In the end, the process and content are as informative to the subject, as they are the subject.

I delve into the personal because I want to recast the incidence of heroism, since we, as activists and advocates, are by default concerned with saving others. While we spend our energies fighting the demons of humanity – discrimination, injustice, intolerance, human rights abuses – we forget that the demons are not just out 'there'; they may inhibit within. Likewise, our advocacy platform is shrouded in abstract terms so fickle that it can be a weapon of attack in one instance and equally come under attack in another.

In our engagement with the boundaries of human rights advocacy, we increasingly operate from shifting sites of apposition and opposition, our ideology being the only constant. Many aspects of our life remain surreal since, other than the issues we subscribe to, we do not, as activists, maintain deep attachments. We are in constant motion: dashing from one forum to another, travelling from one city to another, taking on new issues and joining new alliances. Sometimes we are with familiar faces but often we are with new ones. We are everywhere and really nowhere.

Our lifestyle runs the risk of making our advocacy impersonal – almost clinical. As we become absorbed in the activist culture, we can easily lose sight of what gave our activism life. We accumulate histories from our various journeys and in the process carry away a lot of baggage, which has the potential to be cruelly unloaded on to others.[1] Or worse, we may become paralysed by the burden. To evade this fate, I recognize that I am a woman with my own history, my own struggles, which shape my worldview and inform my activist agenda. I find it challenging to find a balance between ideal and practice, present and past, in order to forge a desired future.

In our advocacy, we take on issues or causes 'out there', where the particular is generalized and divorced from the individual experience. Because we define our advocacy as an intervention that reaches out to 'the other', distance is created between the action and the actor, raising questions as to where we, as activists, position ourselves within our own advocacy efforts.

My reflection, however, seeks to recognize the personal struggles we face as activists, sometimes in intimate aspects of our lives, and how this impacts on our ability to live and realize our values. After all, this is the basis of why we engage in 'principled advocacy' and how we ground ourselves in this. In this chapter it is my intention to explore my personal struggles around faith, family and relationships to discern how they inform my association with larger advocacy agendas. Certainly, it is through our ability to make personal associations between cherished and propounded values – the praxis that we apply to ourselves – that we cultivate and live our advocacy in a conscious manner.

Situating myself

I am an activist. Activism, for me, is a calling: a way of doing something, a particular consciousness in an ideology aimed at transforming thoughts and processes within and without. My activism is done not in a vacuum but in a context. For example, the organization I am affiliated to is concerned with developing the leadership and organizational capacities of women, young and old, to enable them to exercise active citizenship.[2] This process is neither linear nor singular. I intervene in the process of 'others' as much as I engage with my own practice and values. Indeed, a conscious development practice demands scrutinizing the bearing that my own biases and values have on my practice such that I do not transfer my 'baggage' on to others. This consciousness forces me to have a certain level of humility to recognize and respect an ongoing process, as well as the people partaking in it, irrespective of academic qualifications or social status.

To *do* advocacy one must have fire in one's belly. Many believe that activism involves emotion and passion but it can also be impersonal. Activism is increasingly defined and outlined in purely technical terms where the paramount objective is efficiency, i.e. the output, which in turn leads to a saturation of passion. Likewise, the time-defined nature of an advocacy agenda allows us flexibility in so far as how deeply we want to engage with the issue and process. Hence, while we may oppose land reforms, it is not necessary to have an attachment to key subjects of the reforms, say pastoralists. And while our activism may recognize some of their realities, it does not fully represent those realities. It is an impersonal intervention. Our expertise in a particular discipline, not our commitment, gives

us legitimacy and authority in a particular instance. Equally, there are instances in which we become very attached to a process or a situation, where it becomes 'ours'. It may be because a key principle we believe in, and which informs our work, is involved, such as gender justice.

For me, the distinction between advocacy as a calling and advocacy as a job became clear when working on child rights issues. About a decade after the National Summit for Children to popularize the Convention on the Rights of the Child, I participated in a national effort to put children's rights back on the agenda. This was done via a Children's *Baraza*,[3] convened to coincide with the annual Day of the African Child. To attract maximum publicity, we convened the *Baraza* at the legislative capital of Tanzania, Dodoma; even the prime minister agreed to grace the event.[4] Participating organizations, mostly child rights organizations, facilitated the presence of about 300 children from all over Tanzania. Guidelines for the *Baraza* were indicated, including making the issues of security and hygiene a priority.[5] Alas, by the time the children were scheduled to arrive for the *Baraza*, nothing was done about security and hygiene. Instead, valuable time was spent squabbling over money. Unwilling to expose the children to health and other hazards, I opted to book the children into alternative accommodation where they could wash and rest until the matter was resolved.

The organizing committee opposed my decision. They threatened me with executive sanction. How dare I tamper with 'Tanzanian children' against the wishes of local agencies? My arrogance and defiance were attributed to the fact that I worked for an international organization. In reality, the attack was grounded in the fact that I had not acceded to their demands for more funds. Additionally, I was a young, independent-minded woman, who was well placed in the organization. What I was not prepared for was the use of the lives of innocent children to make their point.

My decision to act in the best interests of the children became the cause of my public humiliation. Ironically, my accusers were a group of people who claimed to be 'child rights activists'; some headed child rights agencies, while others were long-serving civil servants working on children's issues.[6] Their behaviour was not only shocking but also disappointing. Most saw no problem in appropriating donations meant for the children, such as bottled water, while the children went without. When some of them learnt that each child sponsored by my organization had a change of t-shirt, they protested about receiving only one. This was supposed to be a 'children's event' but the 'child rights activists' showed minimal interest in the children or their needs. Their concern was with using this rare opportunity to maximize personal benefits. Yet they felt justified in rebuking me for upholding a value I believed in. I stood my

ground and questioned my colleagues: 'If these were your children, would you leave them at a place with no running water and an overflowing cesspit, or are hygiene and security dispensable because the subjects are poor rural children?'

In our pursuit of justice we often assume that we share the same ideals with others 'like us'. This incident left me disillusioned about associating myself with a collective whose practised values differed from mine. The experience made me realize that, in actual fact, each individual has a singular and personal interpretation of particular human rights principles, and similarly decide the extent to which they will apply these principles to their own life.

Perhaps a more fundamental lesson from this experience was recognizing the value of anger in fighting for causes. It is not enough to be concerned about an issue. Rather, one must feel outraged and affronted to embark on social protest. Many times, political and economic considerations, in my context, silence the impulse to confront injustice. No one wants to be singled out and punished for an unpopular position. Similarly, the bonds of kinship or comradeship censor one's activism. Our engagement, therefore, remains at the efficiency level: it is something we do and get paid for, rarely something we would die for.[7] In many ways, this has stunted the impact of social justice advocacy in the region where I work, being perceived as foreign and Western, not a local agenda worthy of pursuit. Indeed, principled advocacy is a lonely, hardly lucrative enterprise.

To complicate the situation further, in my context, the risk of challenging the status quo, in a radical way, is intricately associated with people's histories, the relationships they have formed and the cultures they have cultivated. This amplifies the divide between those who 'fit in' and embrace the dominant values of social justice advocacy from those who are categorized as problematic and ostracized.[8] Younger, hungrier voices wanting to push the limits of 'what we know', and thereby giving greater legitimacy to the causes pursued, are quickly suppressed. Social justice advocacy is reduced to a routine, a profession.

Yet, at its dawn, advocacy was not complicated. Passion and time were the only 'qualifications' required to become an advocate. Now one requires academic and political standing to engage in advocacy. Consequently, rather than seeing younger advocates as a resource to local movements, pioneers in the field see them as a threat to their position and purse. Years of sacrifice that have gone unacknowledged have hardened attitudes: some have become apathetic, while others have become bitter. Those who have dared to remain engaged and defiant may provide young activists with inspiration, but not necessarily acceptance, since they too are often

outcasts and have never been part of the mainstream. It is phenomenal that while we become advocates to fight social exclusion, in our practice, we exhibit politics of exclusion mainly to legitimize or delegitimize issues and personalities. It is, therefore, not surprising that rather than focusing on political agendas, activists become consumed with personal vendettas, disillusioning potential converts.

Working with inherent tensions

My induction into human rights theory, and work subsequently, focused on the public and private spheres and how these dictate women's lives. Rights-based advocacy poses great tensions in human rights theory and discourse. The human rights frameworks view human rights as inherent entitlements, which come to every person as a consequence of being human.[9] Therefore, one cannot justify opting out of using this framework on account of 'difference' while such difference, similarly, should not be the basis of discrimination. Effectively, human rights advocacy is about demystifying what is particular about identities on account of the personal – religion, culture and ethnicity, traits normally kept beyond the reach of the public – by subjecting these to universal standards.

A further challenge to human rights advocacy pertains to its domestication, i.e. bringing human rights from the international arena and incorporating the ideals into domestic law. While many countries willingly sign human rights treaties, translating the ideals into their specific contexts continues to prove challenging. Sovereignty is often invoked to resist the adoption of universal standards.

I have come to the conclusion that the tension inherent in rights-based advocacy, and particularly between the public and the private, is not only legal or political, but essentially human, and therefore more encompassing. Traditionally, advocacy efforts for compliance to human rights norms focused largely on state responsibility, rarely challenging established practice. Moreover, a history of cultural, gender and economic domination clouds the case for the universalization of values.

Certainly we, as individuals, have the potential of leading multiple, and at times parallel, existence(s): that facet easily recognized in professional circles becomes alien in the personal and vice versa. What we show and what we keep hidden is *de facto* political. In some instances, it is well orchestrated and designed to meet some motive, some objective. In other instances, it is more spontaneous, almost subconscious, perhaps an indication of who we really are. Similarly, what we are can become so inextricably mixed with what we do that it becomes difficult to distinguish the person from the vocation. While our concern is with 'others', our own practices, as advocates, barely come under scrutiny. Do we indeed lead by example such that we move beyond the commitment to human rights, not only on the basis of conviction, but also in action? If the boundaries are thus blurred, where do we then find legitimacy in our strict association with human rights and social justice work?

The origins of an identity

Where is the soul of my advocacy? In answering this question, I find resonance with remarks made by Mahnaz Afkhami, an Iranian human rights activist. She observes:

> Women's struggle to define an identity has been in part a struggle to become visible to themselves and to others. As we become increasingly involved in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields, our interest, that is, the foci of our rights, spread over the entire range of human concerns.[10]

My activism finds its origins not only with my upbringing but also from my encounter with politics of exclusion: from within and without. I am an activist because my personal trajectory involves fighting bias on account of my race, my disposition, my size, my sex and my politics or lack thereof. I am a black, African, Muslim, petite woman. But I also harbour other complexities that add to my identity and, in a sense, give me my multiple identities.

A question that increasingly becomes relevant, for people similarly situated, is from what basis should an identity be constructed? Should it be on the basis of affinity, ethnicity or nationality? Or should an identity be imposed, claimed or assumed? I see myself as a world citizen, identifying myself with the general but in doing so, continuing to be very aware of the particular. Perhaps it is the fact that I come from a small island nation, yet my affinity to it is as intense as my attachment to the mainland and rural Tanzania where I live.[11] Some define me as *Mzanzibara* (a Zanzibari of the mainland). My parents are from two different communities, which they know about from word of mouth and not through their own experience. Thus their being 'this' or 'that' is more on account of lineage than attachment. It is, however, easier for them to identify themselves as Zanzibari, while my siblings and I see ourselves as Tanzanians. Our itinerant lifestyle has allowed us to create our own culture: one that represents our experiences growing up in different parts of the world amidst different cultures and subcultures. This polarization of location and experience has also meant that the sense of attachment my parents have with their siblings, and the extended family, is something my siblings and I do not

share; we cannot be as close-knit. Much as we do try to keep the family bonds warm, the reality is that there is too big of a gap for traditional propinquity.

This is the reality of an ever-globalizing world that churns out satellite citizens like me; people who may share more with people thousands of miles away than with someone just a few miles away, even if this person is a relation. Therefore, the fact that I live in Tanzania does not make me a representative sample of an ordinary Tanzanian, nor does the fact I am an African who lives on the African continent make me a generic African. Rather, I think I represent the inherent diversity in my country and in my continent; a reality that activists, politicians and the media have largely chosen to ignore.

Defining the particular

There is an overwhelming assumption that all Africans either live in rural areas or emanate from rural areas. Such views became official in my country with the propagation of 'peasant politics', which rendered those groups with no, or weak, peasant ties invisible. I, for one, come from a cosmopolitan society; the Swahili are largely urban folk. For the better part of my young life, my relationship with the 'rural' was a three-acre *shamba* my father had three kilometres outside Stone Town.[12] It was a place we looked forward to going to every evening and most weekends. *Shamba* for us was fun – allowing us to appreciate another side of nature but also allowing us to spend time with our father, who travelled a lot when we were children. My development work, however, exposes me to another reality of rural life and people's attachment to their land. I have come to appreciate the connectedness of rural life to land in rural realities. Urban folks only realize something is wrong when it is unavailable in the market or on the store shelf.

However, social and political pressures deny us the ability to disassociate ourselves from dominant stereotypes because by doing so you are perceived as being a 'wannabe', and denying your origins, which are unfortunately predetermined for everyone. By default we have no voice or choice to assert who we are, since the voice of the dominant is deemed representative. Perhaps because of my heritage, I consciously resist the over-generalization of people's realities. In particular, I take issue with the generalization of women's realities as I find this disempowering, particularly when realities do not fit neatly into empirical approaches and modern notions of rights and progress. It has, for example, been common to say that African women do not own property; as activists, we lobby for law reforms to enable women to own property. The problem is we have never questioned the validity of such claims and, when challenged, we react in patronizing ways. We assume that what we know and do is the norm.

Yet lived history can challenge our frames of reference. My grandmothers, for example, all had property: movable and immovable. To maintain their autonomy, the men moved into their homes and understood that they remained there at my grandmothers' good will. This, however, has changed during my mother's, as well as my, time. Increasingly, educated women are becoming more dependent on their men, drawing their identities from them and referring not to 'my property' but to 'our property', or worse, 'his property'. Incongruously these women now go around convincing their 'less enlightened' sisters that they are deprived!

Celina Romany made a similar observation when recounting the experiences of women from the Global South at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights. She hinted at how Northern women objectified women from the South yet claimed solidarity, a situation reminiscent of the class and racial struggles of the white or elite left. She observed that 'most women were left to feel [like] powerless clients represented to the world by the enlightened advocates of the north. Women were once again cast as sinners for the redemption script of missionaries.'[13] In the process, we develop a level of arrogance, often unconscious, when we recognize that our education, race or social status puts us on a pedestal from where we claim legitimacy for our agendas. Ultimately, we perpetrate the same vices we vow to condemn, albeit subtly. We assume that because we have an education and have mastered modern terminologies and technologies, we somehow are above the 'masses'. It is therefore incumbent upon us to bring these masses into compliance through 'sensitization and awareness-raising sessions' with agreed human rights and social justice norms. It is not that the upholding of human rights and social justice principles are not noble. Rather, what is problematic is the desire, often unacknowledged, to influence a dominant conception or particular category without allowing it to evolve organically and thereby acquiring its own legitimacy.

Surviving the betrayal of ideals

Home was my first school in social justice. This is where I was taught core values of tolerance, equality, justice and compassion. This is where I learnt to 'walk the talk'. Thus when my parents' marriage of over thirty years crumbled, I felt betrayed in many ways. But mine was not a selfish motive, wishing that they remained together to suit some social expectation. As far as I was concerned, they had done their part in bringing us up. If they were now happier apart, so be it. What was disconcerting was the way in which it occurred. My father unilaterally decided that he would

end the relationship. When there was an attempt at reconciliation, he wanted his way or no way. My mother's work-related travels became the focus of his discontent, which suggested a façade mainly because she has always worked; the only time she did not work was when she went back to school. So this could not have been a valid reason. I suspect that my father was depressed, suffering from the retirement syndrome, and that the insecurities that came with it were heightened by my mother's work-related mobility. Unable to articulate, or rather admit and share, his fears, he chose an escape from his frustration in the form of a divorce.

The most difficult thing to cope with was perhaps what ensued, or rather did not happen, after his unilateral decision to leave. There was no property settlement or discussion on the implication of the separation. Instead what was validated was his capacity to make such a decision. This was a blow to my activism. Where is the justice when, by a unilateral act, one person can wipe away the years spent building a life together? I spent the better part of my early activist work in a legal aid clinic assisting women realize their rights in the family. I did not contemplate that one day I would be faced with a situation where one of my biggest supporters, my father, would stand guilty of denying my mother recognition for her contributions, direct and indirect, made during their marriage. To say the least, I was outraged. Yet, society questioned how I could be outraged with my own father![14]

My mother chose not to pursue the matter. Like many Swahili women, she was too proud to entangle herself in a property dispute. Doing so would lower her status. This may well be so, for a woman with means and some form of support, but what happens to countless homemakers, mostly women, who sacrifice their youth bringing up families, if this support counts for nothing? Will their pride feed them and see them through old age? Moreover, what gives a husband the prerogative to end the relationship at will, with no due consideration of the other? And why is there the assumption that it is up to the man to be merciful, and that he solely has the discretion of giving or not giving his wife a parting gift upon divorce? More importantly, why should this be a gift and not a right by virtue of one's contributions in acquiring the property?

I do not know if I can ever come to terms with the fact that my father, the man who taught us our values, our belief in humanity, who ingrained in us a sense of justice and fairness, would first think that what he is, and what he has acquired, is solely by his own account. Nor could I have imagined that he would be ungracious and deny my mother some share of the property they acquired together, even if symbolically. If, after years of intimacy, he could dispense with her well-being, could he, or anyone for that matter, truly be passionate and committed to those less familiar

to him? Certainly, charity begins at home. If we cannot be compassionate to those closest to us, it is unlikely we will be to others. And, if we cannot require those closest to us to exemplify social justice virtues, what mandates us to demand it of others? I have no qualms that equality and justice are standards I will not compromise on, but I realize that demanding it from others also requires that I share personal challenges in upholding the values I espouse. Doing so allows us to move from the abstract to the personal, thereby situating ourselves squarely between the tensions of social justice advocacy.

Moving the personal to the public

Our realities as citizens of the world expose us to external forces, which compound our internal struggles. My Islamic identity is increasingly a burden that I, and many others, have to endure as a result of a global assault that on the one hand defines you as an aggressor and a terrorist, while on the other it paints you as a victim and backward. Consequently, being Muslim gives others a licence to judge you based on assumptions they may have. For instance, many expect the same level of groove in my social life as they see in my advocacy. But because I am profoundly spiritual and very subdued in lifestyle and character, I am labelled 'conservative'. On the other hand, the conservative group thinks I am too liberal, too opinionated, and too Western; they approach me with much suspicion. My life and choices are thus under constant scrutiny. Likewise my authenticity is constantly in question. The conservative camp asks, 'If you are a Muslim, why aren't you married? Why don't you wear an *abaya*?'[15] Feminists ask, 'How do you reconcile being Muslim and progressive?'

It strikes me that if one is Muslim then the concern with balancing religion and activism is heightened. Activists I have come across who happen to be religious or spiritual from other faiths hardly attract the same scrutiny in the movement, nor do they get the same exclamations and questions about the fact that they are Hindu or Christian.[16] Their faith is hardly extraordinary, nor is their religious heritage assumed to influence their outlook the way Islam is assumed to cloud mine. Clearly being 'Muslim' invokes, for many, images of cloaked women, sexual repression and high levels of ignorance. Yet I approach my faith as something personal. I do not use it to attract acceptance or to allow me to fit in. I recognize that even my understating of doctrine and practice may differ with others who identify themselves as Muslim. My philosophy is therefore to live and let live.[17] I do not fit the profile of 'the ideal' Muslim, nor do I seek to. The same applies to my activism. I believe that who we are is partly genes, partly a product of our environment. It also results from the choices we make

as human beings. I may be Muslim, but I have a choice in what I do and what I don't do. I choose not to drink, I choose not to sleep around and I choose not to tolerate injustice, in any form. Choosing not to do these things is a lifestyle choice of being sober, sane and content.

While the politics of exclusion are rife in our lives, and they may indeed compel one to claim an affiliation, I choose neither to remain on the fringes nor to be fully absorbed. Rather, I want to chart out my own destiny, create my own space, which I can share with diverse others while still undergoing an experience that is deeply personal. To do this, I have to defy stereotypes. Defiance, though painful, remains for me an empowering option mainly because when defying, you not only go against the dominant, but also challenge yourself to reason, and to accept the consequences of thought and action. Nevertheless, one must defy on principle and not just for the sake of being exceptional. Social justice advocacy, therefore, should give expression and recognition to personal marks of resistance in challenging deep-seated prejudices that permeate human reason and action. Otherwise, it loses significance and passion. Certainly, the challenge in advocacy rests with the personal. Core values we espouse can no longer concern just 'those people' out there but must concern 'us' right here. Nor can they be externalized or dealt with in a technical, mechanical or surgical fashion. I have to search my soul not only to make peace with my conscience but also to accept the consequences of my conviction.

Notes

1 I use 'baggage' to refer to the unresolved issues, questions or fears we need to work with in our development but fear to do so. Consequently we push them into our subconscious but because the issues are unresolved they keep on resurfacing in different ways, including extreme cases of denial, which is more a manifestation of our sense of insecurity when faced with the inevitable than it is about the issue or person prompting the feeling. But because it is easier evading addressing our fears we often load them on to others and justify to ourselves and to others that they are the problem.

2 Sahiba ★Sisters Foundation, a Muslim women's development network.

3 Children's Council.

4 Commemorated every 16 June in memory of schoolchildren killed by the South African racist police in Soweto in 1976 while protesting against apartheid, which denied them many rights, particularly the right to education.

5 The *Baraza* site was a government secondary school. Lavatories were blocked, there was no running water or lighting on pathways and dormitories had no mosquito nets.

6 Unlike the rest of the organizations, we made an undertaking with the parents of the children before signing them up for the trip. We knew most of these children as they came from our programme areas.

7 This and the ensuing comments are based on my experiences working in the East Africa region.

8 I think this has denied us of critical minds allowing us to move our advocacy from a basic to a more strategic level.

9 UN (n.d.), *Human Rights: A Basic Handbook for UN Staff*, p. 3.

10 Mahnaz Afkhami (1995), 'Identity and culture: women as subject and agents of cultural change', in Margaret A. Schuler (ed.), *From Basic Needs to Basic Rights: Women's Claim to Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Women, Law and Development International), p. 220.

11 I was born in Zanzibar but have lived most of my life on the mainland.

12 This was a result of revolutionary government policy in redistributing a maximum of three acres of farm land to all Zanzibaris.

13 Celina Romany (1995), 'On surrendering privilege: diversity in a feminist redefinition of human rights law', in Schuler, *From Basic Needs to Basic Rights*, p. 548.

14 By implication the suggestion is that it is only justifiable to be outraged by the acts of others, not your own.

15 A long black outer garment that serves as a cloak for women.

16 Just to demonstrate, a noted lady judge in a lawyers' association I belong to attends morning mass every day, attracting praise from the members, whereas the fact that I pray brands me a jihadist or extremist. Because there is an assumption, and this is a lay person's assumption which the educated may also harbour, that other faiths are somehow more progressive or tolerant, the fact they these women identify themselves as activists or feminists is perceived more as a bonus and not as a drawback. Emerging work on women's experiences with fundamentalism across faith, however, reveals a trend for faith establishment and communities to censure them.

17 Nevertheless, being part of the human family, I subscribe to some minimums in etiquette to facilitate co-existence, recognizing that this cannot be left to chance.