

THE JOYS, HURTS AND TRAUMAS OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

By Hope Chigudu

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Friendship in the women's movement has been enriching, nurturing, sustaining and life giving. The movement has provided emotional support, loyalty and comradeship. But at the same time, many women within the movement have experienced abrasive encounters, which have left ugly scars. It is not an exaggeration to say that while the movement is an oasis for many, it is also a terrain of struggle.

The friendships within the movement have been the catalysts for the many gender and feminist organisations that have mushroomed everywhere across the continent during the last decade or so. But it is within the confines of these very structures that the personal alliances, built on a belief in a better life for women, turn into battlegrounds for power among women themselves.

Take the case of the mythical organisation 'Women Unite', formed in 1990 by two women from the same country who got to know each other when travelling to Nairobi for an international women's meeting. A strong friendship began to develop as they discussed the situation of women in their country, and the need for there to be a link between researchers, research and activists. By the end of the workshop, they had agreed to return home and to form 'Women Unite'.

Back home, the idea grew and so did their friendship. In between meetings with other like-minded women who formed the think-tank for developing the organisation, Nyakwezi and Masiko continued to meet on a regular basis to solidify their ideas. They got to know each other better as they discussed their families, work place politics, and everything happening in their environment.

'Women Unite' eventually started, guided by feminist values and the principles of empowerment. As it grew, so did the two women's passion. It became their obsession. They wanted justice for women. They genuinely believed that feminists could turn things around for their country.

They sat for hours after work and discussed everything under the sun until their own families became part of 'Women Unite'. The spouses were both supportive and hostile. They saw 'Women Unite' as a serious rival - the other much more loved spouse - but they supported it, because they could not run away from the two women's passions. The bond between Nyakwezi and Masiko grew stronger. They attended each other's funerals, parties and other activities. They exchanged food, drinks and gossip. They talked about their children, mothers, shopping, etc. They shared, joked, hurt and healed together. They prayed, cried, walked and fought together. They met each other's spiritual needs; they were there for each other in times of confusion. They 'unpacked' their lives and their relationship with their partners. They became best friends, colleagues, co-activists, sisters, comrades and conspirators. 'Women Unite' was built on shared words, prayers, laughs, tears, phone calls, emails, shopping, movies, lunches, dinners, late night talks, weekend talks, and the listening. The friendship that built the organisation kept each of the women alive.

But somewhere along the way, the friendship began to change. The change came with the growth of the organisation, which demanded that mainstream systems and structures be put in place; that people be employed; that donor reports, audit reports, policies be written; and that governance and other managerial issues be confronted.

The distribution of power, interpersonal relationships within 'Women Unite' and the women's movement, management styles, ideology and a host of other things stayed buried and not openly discussed. These concerns began to eat away at the two women's relationship. And, since the organisation was now a key player in the women's movement, the friendship between Nyakwezi and Masiko was affected by what happened in the movement, and their friendship affected whatever happened in the movement.

With the growth of 'Women Unite', the passion that characterised the original thinking started to evaporate. The focus was much more on developing the institution. The need to build a different kind of organisation, one moulded on feminist values and principles, instead of the patriarchal culture that permeated through 'Women Unite', became a mute subject.

Although the organisation worked closely with outstanding women thinkers, the engagement did not involve discussing the politics of 'Women Unite' itself or the politics of the women's movement. Issues related to relationship with staff, who was close to whom, which staff member was invited to whose house, whose voice carried more weight, became real issues of potential conflict. Internal pedagogical challenges were only talked about in the corridor. There was no critical space to discuss ways of linking feminist theory with practice. Warning bells rang loudly, but no one listened.

The conflict surfaced slowly, but surely. It became ugly. The only thing that the people could agree on was that the conflict was extraordinary and just plain bizarre. The knives pierced more than each other's hearts. It struck a collective nerve, the movement's nerve. The fight between Nyakwezi and Masiko threatened the very existence of 'Women Unite'. It spread to the women's movement as individuals were forced to take sides. 'Women Unite' bled, and so did the women's movement.

'Women Unite's experience is the story of many organisations. In some countries, an entire movement has been 'killed', because of differences between two divas. Some of the most interesting, enterprising and creative sisters have withdrawn from the movement, because of conflict with key members. Some have gone into depression, and others have died of strokes.

The phenomenon of power continues to haunt the women's movement. There are no mechanisms for conflict resolution; there is little tolerance for dissent and constructive criticism; theory is not linked to practice; and, the space is not opened for all who believe in equality, equity and justice.

Issues of friendship within the women's movement require many more conversations and interactions, and the design of strategies and tools to stimulate debate and activate the insights, imagination, and collective experience of feminists within the movement. This opinion piece begins a discussion that needs to be pursued and continued. Surely the cause of women's emancipation is too important to be railroaded or thwarted by divisions based on trivial rivalries and differences.

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