



# A Meeting of Hearts and Minds:

A Reflection Report on Movement  
Building in Kenya and Uganda



AKINA MAMA  
WA AFRIKA



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# Foreword

The reflection spaces on movement building, held in Nairobi and Kampala in November 2024 and May 2025, respectively, are a testament to the collective struggle and aspiration for a dignified and equitable world for all African women, in all their diversity. The reflection spaces build onto the study on **The Role of Feminist and Transformational Leadership in Movement Building**, which was conducted in 2024 as part of a learning and reflection initiative. They build upon a shared vision of feminist movement building as a powerful political strategy for decolonizing power and advancing African women's liberation.

The **Nairobi reflection space on movement building** provided feminist leaders in Kenya a platform to collectively reflect on what movement building entails and explore innovative strategies for strengthening movement building within their context. This was followed by a convening in Kampala, themed 'A Meeting of Minds and Hearts: A Collective Reflection on Feminist Movement Building in Uganda', which deepened this reflection role in movement building across the continent. AMwA has also compiled an anthology ***Voices, Visions and Seeds for Uprising***, that documents how African feminist leadership — deeply rooted in histories of anti-colonial resistance — continues to adapt, transform, and spark radical action.

The Nairobi and Kampala spaces particularly brought together diverse voices of AWLI alumni, feminist leaders, and activists who have experienced firsthand the potentials and complexities of feminist leadership in the face of growing backlash, shrinking civic space, and limited resources. Together, they interrogated prevailing leadership models, shared stories of transformation, and envisioned strategies to strengthen solidarity, inclusivity, and sustainability across movements.



The two-part report reflects a nuanced understanding of the challenges at hand, ranging from fragmentation of the movement, the effect of the NGO-ization of the movement, the anti-gender movement, donor dependency and persistent barriers within feminist leadership itself. Yet, they also highlight the resilience and transformative quality of feminist praxis, grounded in radical care, collective action, and Pan-African solidarity.

By weaving together reflections from Kenya, Uganda, and transnational feminists and seasoned women leaders, this report affirms a shared commitment to building intersectional, accountable movements grounded in lived realities. It highlights the resolve of feminist leaders to reimagine leadership, not as an individual pursuit, but as a collective journey toward liberation, where the power of siblinghood, shared histories, and visionary futures converge.

As you engage with these reflections, may they inspire a renewed commitment to feminist leadership as a transformative force, one that nurtures solidarity, resists oppression, and boldly shapes futures where African women and girls thrive in dignity and power.

**In solidarity,  
Akina Mama wa Afrika**



Letters From Nairobi  
Weaved With Love  
And Solidarity



# The Story of Akina Mama wa Afrika: Forty Years of keeping the fire burning!

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The story begins, as most revolutions do, with a spark—not a timid flicker, but a bold and unapologetic blaze determined to light up the oppressive shadows of patriarchy. Forty years ago, Akina Mama wa Afrika emerged as a powerful response, a collective refusal, and a reclaiming of power. It was a gathering of women who knew that the chains binding them were not ordained by destiny but forged by deliberate design. *And what is designed can be dismantled.*

To awaken consciousness is no small feat. It demands courage, for it unravels the comforting illusions that protect the status quo. *AKINA MAMA ignited fires in women's minds, urging them to question the systems that silenced, exploited, and demeaned them.* These were not soft inquiries—they were battle cries, summoning generations to reimagine and reclaim their futures.

The fight for liberation was never going to be easy. Patriarchy is a master builder, erecting walls that seem unbreakable. But Akina Mama understood resistance. They cultivated leadership, equipping African women with tools to navigate and dismantle oppressive systems. Knowledge became their weapon, sharp and precise, carving paths through entrenched power structures. They did not merely whisper to power—they demanded change with voices that could not be ignored.

But this was never just about tearing down—it was also about building anew. *Movement building remains the lifeblood of akina mama wa afrika, uniting struggles, linking histories, and weaving solidarities across borders and generations.* In a world where civic spaces are shrinking, this work is not just a strategy—it is survival.

*Today, the fire still burns.* Akina Mama wa Afrika moves forward undaunted by the weight of the present, knowing that collective action and daring dreams can forge futures where African women stand tall, free, and unbroken.

This is not simply the story of an organization—it is the story of a movement. *it is the story of african women reclaiming their voices, choices, and autonomy.* The fire lit forty years ago remains a beacon, guiding us all toward a horizon where justice, dignity, and love are not dreams but lived realities.

# Dear Feminists, you have since forgotten how to breathe...

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We write to you with reverence, knowing the battles you have fought, the dreams you have carried, and the toll it has taken on your bodies, spirit and mind. We write to remind you—before all else—to breathe. Deep, steady breaths. The kind that reach the places where wounds have long festered. The kind that remind you of the earth beneath your feet, the sky above your head, and the rhythm of your heart—proof that you are still here. And that is no small feat.

We are here today because others once dared to dream of us. Women, whose names we may never know, sacrificed their own dreams, ambitions, and futures so that we might exist in this one. They fought battles they knew they might not win, for a world they might not live to see. Yet they dreamed, stubbornly, fiercely, because even in the darkest moments, they understood that tomorrow was worth the fight. Their dreams carried a cost—personal, communal, immeasurable. But their sacrifices carved out space for us to stand today. And so, we must ask: at what cost do we now carve out space for ourselves?

If the space you occupy is too small, too stifling for your spirit to breathe, that is a cost too high to bear. We have learned to survive in a world bent on breaking us. In a bid to seek validation from external systems, we have muted parts of ourselves, erased what seemed too loud, too unsightly, too unlovable. And yet, even as we resist, we carry the scars of this silencing. But today, we ask you to reclaim what you have lost. To return to yourself, piece by piece. To embrace the parts you were told to hide, to cradle the parts you were taught to despise. You are whole, even when the world insists you are fragmented.

It takes courage to exist fully in these feminist spaces. They are places where we confront the unexpected, the unknown, and the truths that unsettle and liberate us in equal measure. And yet, how often have we abandoned that bold, radical curiosity, for the familiarity of survival mode? We are so often consumed—by funding cycles, reports, indicators, the endless to-do lists that tether us to the mundane. We forget to notice the small victories, to honor the quiet triumphs, to sit in the power of our collective being.



But let us not forget: feminism is not in the report submitted at midnight, nor in the perfect grant proposal. It is in your breath. It is in your body. It is in the way you hold yourself after a long day and whisper, “You are enough.” It is in the way you challenge that relentless inner critic, daring to say, “I see your shame, and I reject it.” It is in the way you build solidarity—with others, yes, but first with yourself.

This work, our work, is not without its burdens. We carry the weight of histories and futures, of trauma and resilience, of battles fought and yet to come. And still, we must not allow ourselves to collapse at the finish line, teaching those who come after us only how to survive, not how to live. Feminism demands liberation, yes—but it also demands healing. Healing that tends to our wounds as much as it envisions a world where they no longer exist.

So, dear feminists, we ask you to pause. Sit with yourself. Sit with your sisters. Take stock of where you are and who you are, not as a critique, but as a celebration. You are here, not by accident, but by design—one crafted by the hands of those who came before you. You are here, and you are enough. And when you next feel the weight of it all, remember this: the freedom we seek for the world must first live within us. So breathe deeply. Reclaim your grounding. Tend to your wounds. And know that the act of healing is, in itself, an act of resistance.

With love and solidarity,

*Feminist Activist and Nyamwathi Facilitator of self-Governance for and on behalf of Kenyan feminists in all their diversities.*







# Reflections from the Femi-Ninjas of Kenya:

## Lessons for African Feminists on Enhancing Movement Building.

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The story of feminist movement building in Africa begins not in lofty boardrooms but in the marketplaces, the villages, and the hearths of women who have borne the weight of the world. *These are women whose stories are not statistics, whose lives cannot be distilled into reports for international donors. They are the architects of change, yet so often, they are silenced in the very movements built on their blood and sweat.*

*'Nothing for us, without us'* is a simple declaration, but one that cuts to the heart of what it means to build a feminist movement. How often have we, in our zeal to push forward, spoken for women instead of creating space for their voices to be heard directly? *What would it look like if the grassroots women themselves—not their anecdotes, not their proxies—sat at every table where decisions about their futures were made?* Movement building must center these voices, not as tokens of authenticity but as active agents of change. Let them bring their challenges, their analyses, and their solutions shaped by the contours of their realities. Only then will our movements reflect the diversity of the struggles they claim to represent.

Yet, even as we strive for inclusion, we must confront another truth: *'If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm'* Feminism, we have learned, is not just a theory; it is deeply personal. It lives within us, shaping how we engage with ourselves, our peers, and the structures around us. But how often do we separate our personal struggles from our activism, pretending that the two are unconnected? *How often do we carry unresolved battles into the spaces where we are meant to foster solidarity?*

To build movements that last, we must begin with ourselves. Who am I in this work? What is my role, my value, my positioning? These questions are not abstract; they are urgent and practical. We cannot demand transformation in the world while refusing to examine the fractures within our own selves and communities. This centering of the self is not selfish—it is foundational. It allows us to come into the movement whole and to create spaces where solidarity is not just performative but rooted in mutual respect and shared purposes.

Movements, however, are not fueled by introspection alone. They are forged in the crucible of action, of relentless work that often feels thankless. ‘With our blood and sweat, the movement stands and grows’. This is not metaphorical. The labor of movement building is physical, emotional, and deeply exhausting. There are funding constraints, rising anti-rights agendas, and the crushing weight of personal responsibilities. Yet, we press on. Not because we are invincible, but because the alternative—inaction—is unthinkable.

And still, the reality remains: our movements are human, and so are we. There are nights when you leave a strategy session, inspired by the fire of collective vision, only to return home to a house with no electricity and an inbox overflowing with unanswered emails. There are mornings when you wake up questioning if it is all worth it, if the fight is truly yours to bear. These moments remind us that movements are not just grand declarations; they are also the mundane, unglamorous grind of everyday life. To sustain our movements, we must first sustain ourselves.

There is no manual for movement building, and perhaps there never will be. The landscape shifts constantly, shaped by the intersections of crises and the resilience of those who rise to meet them. What we know is this: movements thrive when they are intersectional, when they connect the dots between climate justice, economic justice, reproductive rights, and every other struggle that defines our world. No single organization or individual can do it all, but together, our collective power becomes unstoppable.



Solidarity is the lifeblood of this collective power. True solidarity is not transactional; it is transformational. It is the willingness to sit with discomfort, to confront our privileges, and to extend grace even when it is not returned. It is the recognition that our struggles are intertwined, and so too must be our strategies. *In solidarity, we find not only strength but the possibility of healing—a healing that is as collective as it is individual.*

The Femi-Ninjas of Kenya remind us that movement building is both a privilege and a responsibility. It demands that we honor the shoulders we stand on while paving the way for those who will come after us. It calls us to safeguard our gains, to document our everyday resistances and triumphs, and to remain nimble in the face of shifting challenges. Most of all, it asks us to remember that the power to build and sustain movements has always been within us.

*As echoed by **Rachel Kagoiya**, Executive Director, GROOTS Kenya, **Melvine Obola**, Programme and Digital Advocacy Associate, Young Women's Leadership Institute, **Ivy Nyawira Wahito**, Executive Director of the Resource Center for Women and Girls, for and **on behalf of Kenyan feminists, in all their diversities.***





## Rise, Akina Mama wa Afrika: The Call to Liberate, Heal, and Build.

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**SISTERS AND BUILDERS OF OUR LIBERATION**, we speak to you not as separate voices but as one united in the rhythm of a shared struggle. Ours is a story written in the language of resilience, told by the hands that till the land, the minds that strategize, and the hearts that dare to imagine freedom. Across this vast continent, from bustling markets to quiet village paths, from the echo of boardrooms to the chants on the streets, the drumbeat of our work continues.

But the question now is not just how we sustain it—it is how we transcend it, how we weave together the strands of a movement that is local and global, intersectional and transnational. The challenges before us demand that we become architects of a bridge, one that spans the distances between our grassroots and our global advocacy.

*We must also reckon with the wounds we carry, wounds we bring into the very movements meant to liberate us. We are flawed, and our movements reflect this truth.* There is harm within, born of silence, of hierarchy, of the inability to see one another fully. But justice begins in the spaces we build. Transformative justice must guide us—not the harsh, reactionary judgment of “casserole feminism,” but a justice rooted in care, in accountability, in the radical empathy that sees harm as a call to heal.

And yet, we cannot ignore the toll this work takes. Feminists, we urge you to embrace the power of rest. Movements are exhausting; we know this because we have felt the ache in our bodies, the heaviness in our spirits. But rest is resistance. *Rest is a strategy. It is what allows us to step back, to breathe, to renew, so we can return to the fight with clarity and strength.* Let us remember that we are not alone in this work, that when one of us steps away, another can carry the banner forward.

There is also the question of resources. Too often, we have looked outward, to donors and external aid, for the sustenance of our movements. This reliance weakens us, makes us bend to priorities that are not ours. *It is time to reclaim Indigenous philanthropy, to return to the wisdom of our communities, to recognize the wealth of knowledge and resources that already exist among us.* The power to fund and sustain our movements lies not in distant capitals but here, in the heart of Africa, among the women who have always found ways to make a way.

And so, as we look forward, we must embrace adaptability. Movements are not static; they shift with the tides of oppression and resistance. We must safeguard the gains of the past, learn from them, and prepare for the battles yet to come. *This is our calling, Akina Mama wa Afrika—to build, to heal, and to dream.*

The power has always been in our hands. Let us wield it boldly. Together, we are the architects of a future where justice, dignity, and liberation are not just aspirations but truths. Together, we rise.

*As echoed by **Sunita Caminha**, UN Women ESARO, **Mary Kambo**, Kenya Human Rights Commission, **Esther Wambui**, Zamara Foundation, Groots Grassroots Champion, **for and on behalf of Kenyan Feminists in all their diversities.***



## Closing Affirmations; who are we?

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We are intentional disruptors,  
We will bring in the grassroots women **to speak for themselves**,  
We will not lose our sense of identity and belonging,  
We will endeavor to share our agenda,  
Our dreams are bolder than our fears,  
We are **brehtaking organizers** and mobilizers,  
We are **re-defining the movement** and despite the challenges  
**STILL WE RISE**,  
We are bold and frank,  
Our bodies are tired, but **WE STILL MOVE FORWARD**,  
This is the time for the shift to happen,  
We are allies, think tanks, sisters, **FEMINISTS**  
**AND THESE CONVERSATIONS WILL NOT DIE HERE!**





Letters From Kampala  
Weaved With Love And  
Solidarity



## Lessons for the Future: The Role of Feminist and Transformational Leadership in Movement Building

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For fifty years, I have walked this path, thirty of those, I have been an activist; fighting, building and dreaming. Some rights we have claimed, some remain beyond reach. Yet I stand here with conviction that the African feminist movement is one of the strongest the world has known. We have not theorized from afar; our insights are grounded in lived experience and frontline engagement.

It is an honour to sit in this space today, especially amid shifting global politics, shrinking civic space, and growing resistance to our work. Our movements are under siege, physically and online. Modern fascism is loud and unrelenting. Black women are facing open hostility, even within institutions that once offered us protection. Yet, when the backlash comes, I know we have touched a nerve. We have struck the power centers. This resistance is a sign of our impact, sometimes costing us our mental health, safety and rights. The question then is, how do we build movements that can thrive in this reality?

*"I am not self-made, I am who I am because I have stood on the shoulders of other women, in all their diversities. I honour those who came before us and held the line."*

In 2002, I was asked to join the African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI). At that time, I was full of fire. As of that time, my car was always stocked with spare clothes and placards, ready to go on protest at any moment. But I needed guidance and the AWLI gave me a community that saw, heard and embraced me. When I left, I was no longer afraid, I had clarity and focus. As leaders, we must never settle, we must never 'arrive', we must always hunger for new knowledge and community. When we stay teachable, we thrive.



In 2007, I joined Akina Mama wa Afrika as the Director, to lead a feminist organisation within 5 years. My first task was immense; transitioning the organization from being Global North-led to African-rooted. This was a realisation of a goal I set for myself in 2002, post the AWLI: it was tough but it built my resilience and vision.

In hindsight, I realise that I began movement building at an early age. I still remember those days; young, fresh from the university, the only woman in my village to have made it that far. We would gather under a tree as women with no titles but full of wisdom to help each other out and save together. While applying for my master's in the UK, I handwrote that application, and when the time came to submit it, these women contributed money for my transport fare, sent off the application and forgot about it. Life went on under that tree. Then one day, a letter came, saying I had been awarded the scholarship. I did not know what the research topic for my masters would be, so those women told me, "Write about how we save and lend each other money here in the village." These women, in all their simplicity and brilliance, encouraged me to write about our gatherings for my masters thesis. That was our model of solidarity economics and mutual aid. It was a movement!

Now I ask, when we sit in boardrooms talking about movements, are these women part of the conversation? We need to go back to the roots because the raw work is happening there. These women hold systems, strategies, and skills that sustain entire communities. We must learn from them, not for them.

Are we documenting this grounded knowledge? Are we capturing the shifts we've fought for in both public and private decision-making spaces? We must write, and write from our lived experiences.



## What have I learned?

Feminism is not a dress you put on in the morning and remove at night. It is a life-long commitment to dismantling patriarchy everywhere. Not just in Governments, churches and homes but also in relationships, friendships and leadership. How do we balance this feminist politics with our other identities? How do we negotiate with patriarchy without losing our essence?

Walking the talk is not optional, it means valuing everyone's contribution. How are we managing power in our organizations? We denounce patriarchy, yet sometimes, we replicate it. I have been hurt the most by feminists.

Equity and justice are our bedrock yet we live in a time where these are contested. We must realise that the NGO framework is not the only way, especially now, in the face of surveillance and funding cuts.

We say we are organizing, but how inclusive are we? Who feels seen in our movements? Who feels excluded? Who do we silence? What does shared leadership look like? How are we managing our personal lives? Our intimate partners? Our employees?

Do we even know who feminists are? Some do the work but do not wear the badge. Others wear the badge, yet work against us. Do we become feminist police? Or do we walk alongside them, hoping they evolve?

I have learned that feminism is isolating, it is lonely. If I do not work in an NGO, does that disqualify me from being a feminist? Feminists are dying alone. When we die, who buries us? Who carries our wishes? Do we commemorate each other with love? How many of us are truly available for each other?



## Moving ahead

We must have clear strategies for negotiating with patriarchy. Not all confrontations are loud. Some are quiet, strategic and necessary.

We need feminist accountability. What does that look like? Can we gently but firmly rehabilitate ourselves and others back into the movement?

We must push back against erasure, who is documenting our stories? Who owns the information, donors? Is it theirs to keep? Social movements that last, document their work.

We must re-think how we resource the movement. In this anti-rights wave, how do we stay agile? How do we re-organize?

We must care for ourselves and each other. We must rest, heal and reflect. Let us not build movements of broken people who, in turn break others.

We must bring everyone aboard because there is space for all of us.

**Let us be feminists without IFs, BUTs or HOWEVERs!**

*As echoed by **Solome Nakaweezi Kimbungwe**, Pan-African Feminist activist, Former Executive Director at Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA)*





## AWLI 8000: Igniting Feminist Fire Since 1997

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AWLI alumni and leaders shared their experiences, reflections and perspectives on the role of feminist and transformational leadership in movement building. The alumni and leaders representing a cross-section of actors from various sectors and AWLI cohorts, including some dating back to 2002, shared their insight drawn from their diverse journeys and evolving leadership experiences.

"In our organization, we don't believe leadership belongs to one person. We rotate the Executive Director position among all staff. That is what shared power means to us. That lesson came from the AWLI, that every voice matters, and leadership must be inclusive and deliberate. Strategic planning, everyone in the organisation is involved. We do it together.."- **Gloria Mutyaba - Programme Manager, Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG)**

"Before the AWLI, I worried too much about what people would say. AWLI taught me self-worth and how to lead from within. Now, I focus on holding space for other women. AWLI gave me a sisterhood, one I can call on when things get hard. I've learned that feminist leadership means showing up for others, even when you're struggling yourself."- **Olive Namazzi - Lord Woman Councillor – Kampala City Council Authority (KCCA)**

"AWLI taught me to reflect deeply even when it's uncomfortable."

"AWLI gave me a thick skin and a bold voice. As a politician, people want you to say what they want to hear. AWLI pushed me to ask, What do I really stand for? It helped me put gender at the center of everything I do. When I fought to pass anti-FGM legislation, it was that grounding that kept me going. AWLI re-energizes me. It reminds me that this work is bigger than politics, it's about justice."- **Hon. Jacqueline Amonging - Ugandan Member of Parliament in the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA)**

"I first heard the term 'intersectionality' at the AWLI. I often call myself out on how I make others feel seen and heard. I want to lead in ways that build people, not break them "- **Gloria Mutyaba - Programme Manager, Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG)**

"AWLI has been my compass for 17 years ... I still carry the African Feminist Charter with me, it reminds me why I do this work. Our conversations in the village are informal but powerful. I remember we wrote letters to our future selves in our AWLI Cohort. In mine, I said I would go back and start a women-led organization. I have kept that promise. That's what AWLI does, it anchors you in your purpose."- Rose Kigere - Executive Director, Women's Rights Initiative Uganda (WORI)

I joined in 2021. I came out understanding my rights, voice and value. That clarity has helped me influence policy in my space, I no longer wait for permission to lead. Feminism is no longer an abstract idea. It's how I live, make decisions and relate to others.- Lillian Babirye - Executive Director, Network of Women In Politics (NOWIP)





# Advancing Feminist Leadership for transformative change:

## Becoming the leader we have been waiting for!

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*My story does not begin with me, it begins with my mother.*

A woman the village once called mad, stubborn and uncouth because she refused to be inherited after her husband's death. She chose dignity over tradition, raising seven of us with nothing but resolve and fierce conviction.

She practised politics in her home before it was fashionable to do so in Parliament. She would vote one way and encourage us to vote for our own preferred candidates. *"That is democracy."* She said.

My mother gave me my first campaign strategy.

In 1998, when I dared to run for District Councillor, unmarried, people didn't ask about my vision. They asked, "Who is the man behind you?" And my mother, unyielding as ever, answered, "Tell them this position doesn't come with a husband." When the crowd jeered, I smiled and said, *"Maybe it is the men who have failed culture for they haven't even asked for my hand."*

My mother's spirit echoed again through the African Women's Leadership Institute. There, sisterhood became more than sentiment, it became strategy. I learned to advocate not just for myself, but for all of us, for visibility, for presence, for a seat at every table where decisions are made.

But before the AWLI, there were seeds. My mother, again, used to send me to grassroots meetings in her place. She believed that we deserved to be in those rooms. One day at a Uganda Change Association gathering, Hon. Winnie Byanyima noticed me. “Is there another Winnie here?” she asked. I raised my hand. She smiled and made me preside over the election. That moment was the beginning of a lifelong mentorship and the start of my political awakening.

From there, I became a councillor twice. I hosted delegations of women leaders in Kasese. Volunteering, mobilizing and mentoring were the currency that elevated me in Parliament from Deputy Chief Whip to Chief Whip. When I became Uganda’s first woman Leader of the Opposition, I came seasoned, not by privilege, but by experience.

My path was never smooth, I carried both bruises and blessings. I led the Reform Agenda in the Rwenzori, defended the only Opposition seat for a woman in Western Uganda for three terms and chaired accountability committees.

I am proud of the laws we championed against FGM, against domestic violence, for the dignity of every child, and for the inclusion of people with disabilities. I fought to ensure that every girl, every differently-abled child, found a place in school. I started small, with a diploma and rose through the ranks. I studied through motherhood, sat for exams after childbirth and graduated while campaigning.

AWLI taught me to care deeply for myself, and that to lead well, I must live well. After childbirth, I began to love my body more, not less.

Leadership, I have learned, can be lonely. But it does not have to be, sisterhood makes it bearable. AWLI showed me that I do not have to shine alone, and neither do you.

To my sisters in the space, volunteer, be visible, and intentional, let your work speak and above all, share power. It does not reduce you, it raises all of us. Do not fear learning from those “beneath” you, their ideas matter.



Many of us are struggling with the urge to shine alone, resist it. Lift those coming behind, carry other women along, and hold each other's hands so that when one of us reaches the top, all of us feel seen. The transformation agenda is not a one-woman journey!

Go and shine, become the transformative leaders we know you to be and as you rise, let us rise with you.

*As echoed by **Winnie Kizza**, a Celebrated political actor and the First Female Opposition leader in the Uganda Parliament.*





# A Collective Reflection and Exchange:

## Learning from feminist leadership builders

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"We are often introduced as Executive Directors, but the truth is, we are products of the feminist movement."

*Rita Aciro, the Executive Director of Uganda Women's Network (UWONET); Penelope Sanyu, the Chief Steward of Femme Forte and Sarah Anzoa, President of the Mentorship and Empowerment Programme for young Women (MEMPROW) shared their experiences of traversing feminist leadership and movement building.*

We are often introduced as Executive Directors, but the truth is, we are products of the feminist movement. Many of us were identified in the early stages of our careers and given space to grow. Some of us began our journeys as interns in the late 1990s. Through mentorship, coaching, and exposure, we were moulded by the movement itself. Today, mentorship remains at the heart of the work we do.

In our spaces, we strive to ensure that young women are actively included, not as spectators or tea girls but as leaders. We believe in giving them responsibility, allowing them to take charge, make mistakes, and grow from those experiences. We must ask ourselves, are we creating true leadership opportunities, or just offering symbolic seats at the table?

Our work is grounded in collaboration because we know we cannot go far alone. We must build with others, especially from the grassroots, leveraging existing networks. We hold firm that leadership starts at home. The agency a woman holds at the individual level is often more powerful than any title.



We have created platforms where young women can express themselves freely, spaces of intergenerational sharing; feminist fireplaces where stories are told, preserved, and honored.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist Leadership in Uganda

Today, we have more educated women, and with this exposure comes the strength to stand up for ourselves and others. The women's movement in Uganda is alive and strong. There is coordination among us, we know each other, we share information and we are writing more feminist literature that reflects our realities.

Digital activism has opened new frontiers. It is not just a tool, it is a movement in itself. But we also face persistent and evolving challenges. Gender-based violence has shifted, now taking new forms online, deeply affecting our mental health.

Engaging women in electoral leadership is another hurdle. Too often, women assume they already know it all, yet fail to invest in continuous learning. This creates a growing gap between feminist organizations and women in political leadership.

As we look to the 2026 elections, risks persist, not just in society at large but within civil society spaces themselves. Women's visibility in the media is still low. We are not seeing enough women leaders on talk shows, in opinion spaces, or in the mainstream.

Our feminist spaces are not immune to the same fractures affecting other sectors, ethnicity, political divides, and the effects of multiparty democracy threaten our cohesion. Donor dependency is another real concern. Resources are dwindling, and we are yet to fully coordinate among ourselves as leaders to navigate this reality.



## Advancing the Feminist Movement: Strategies for the Future

Looking forward, we must coordinate as a united front. Even in times of financial scarcity, solidarity gives us power. We must cascade our approaches down to the subnational levels. Our role is not to lead every front but to facilitate other women-led organisations to do their own organising. We must ask ourselves, what leadership models can we share with younger movements to build an intergenerational critical mass?

We cannot afford to remain silent in the face of negative social norms, especially those perpetuated online. Myths about women in leadership abound, that we are disrespectful to our husbands, that we sleep around to get ahead, among others. These must be actively deconstructed, not normalized.

Let us leave a record, let the next generation learn from us. But beyond that, we must innovate because these challenges demand new thinking. How are we leveraging technology in our strategies?

The good news is that the feminist movement is growing. More women and girls are forming organizations and building coalitions. We have male allies walking this journey with us. Let us ensure that the movement not only lives, but thrives.





# A Sneak Peek into the Anthology

## Voices, Visions and Seeds for Uprising

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As part of its learning and reflection initiative, and in an effort to amplify the voices, agency, and thought leadership of women and young women, Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) has curated an anthology that brings together the experiences, perspectives, and insights of African women in all their diversity, on feminist leadership and movement-building. Spanning Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa, and the diaspora among other countries, this collection offers a rich tapestry of writers, insights and lived realities. During the reflection convened in Kampala, Uganda, some of the contributing authors offered a sneak peek into their papers, sharing the ideas and provocations that shaped their contributions to this growing body of feminist knowledge.

*Rebel Hearts, Resilient Voices: Unapologetic Feminist Leadership  
Resisting Backlash & Building Bridges in Africa* by Lilian Njeri Mbuti

*"From the women who went ahead of us, those who walk with us now and those whose hands we are holding, the work is not yet done."* In this paper, Lilian reminds us that African feminist leadership does not simply resist, it builds. It details how we navigate backlash with boldness, how we create alliances across generations, sectors and silos.

*Feminist Leadership through Digital Advocacy: Adapting in the Context of Backlash and Shrinking Civic Space in Uganda* by Mercy Ayaa

*"As we innovate, anti-rights actors also innovate."* Mercy's paper chronicles the rise of digital feminism in Uganda, and cautions that technology is political and gendered. She speaks of digital tribes, not as hashtags or vanity but as homes. *"Are we including rural women in our online dreams? Are we organizing ethically?"*

*Nizilibele Ubanizalwa Ngobani Na? Challenges and Opportunities in Intergenerational Feminist Movement Building* by Vuyokazi Futshane

In this paper, Vuyokaze poses a question in Zulu, her mother tongue. Nizilibele ubanizalwa ngobani na? -Have you forgotten whose children you are? Her paper is an exploration of intergenerational feminist movement building, reminding us that intergenerational dialogue is not an act of charity, it is critical for sustenance; sustenance of the movement for the full emancipation of African women.

The anthology builds on a 2024 AMwA study that affirmed the urgent need for further research to examine and document effective models and strategies for feminist organizing, particularly in the current shifting political landscape. At its core, the anthology asserts that feminist movement-building is not an add-on to African liberation; it is central to it. It emphasizes that feminist and transformational leadership is about reimagining and challenging the normative systems and structures that uphold patriarchy, racism, neocolonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and all forms of oppression and extraction.



# Reflections from Paths Already Walked

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In 1994, we began to dream, quietly at first, but with certainty. At Akina Mama wa Afrika, we started asking ourselves what feminist leadership in Africa should look like. What were the issues we needed to confront? How would we prepare ourselves, and each other? We knew that leadership would not simply arrive, we had to be ready for it. Readiness, for us, meant mentorship, capacity-building, intentional networking, and sharing knowledge across our movements.

But one of our biggest obstacles was access to resources, vision alone was not enough, so we acted. We co-founded the African Women's Development Fund, a way to resource the African feminist movement. We knew that the organizations doing the real work on the ground needed financial support to grow and thrive. That decision was a turning point. Today, I look back with pride at what we built, and how much has grown from that foundation. Creating space for women's voices and leadership is essential work. I am grateful to see those spaces not just survive, but flourish.

Still, the work is demanding. I have learned that balance does not happen by accident, it must be planned. Work and life are not separate, we must care for both. I have also learned that African women are this continent's greatest philanthropists. We organize, we fundraise and we mobilize communities with what little we have. That is why I believe every organization, no matter how small, should have a mutual fund. Something to hold us steady when the storm comes, because the storm always comes.



We must diversify our resources, multiple income streams are not a luxury but a necessity. Each of us is one moment away from a life-altering event and that reality should push us to lead with empathy and care, for others and for ourselves. Health is not optional, go for that check-up, schedule that Pap smear, rest when you need to, and laugh when you can joy, too, is part of the work.

We have come far, but we are not done, the struggle continues, and so does the work.

*As echoed by **Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi**, Former Director, Akina Mama wa Afrika (1991–2001) and Co-founder and First CEO, African Women's Development Fund (2001–2010)*

At the African Women Development Fund (AWDF), our grants ensure that resources reach the hundreds of African women's organizations working daily to improve lives and reshape society. We are proud to stand with Akina Mama wa Afrika and every feminist space that dares to dream of justice, of equity, of freedom.

But we are facing difficult times, for our work and the people we work for and stand with. At times, we feel depleted, stretched and silenced. Still, this is not the time to shrink. It is the time to engage, to regroup, reimagine and resist. In the face of fear, the instinct is to freeze, but freezing is not an option. Not for us. Not now!

In this moment, what we need most is clarity, and the kind of courage that is nurtured through collective strength. Courage rarely stands alone; it is fortified by solidarity, shared purpose, and mutual support. As we move forward, may we continue to learn from one another, to lift each other up, and to lead with the boldness that defines us. Let us remain unapologetic, relentless, and courageous, holding fast to the spirit of the so-called 'bad girls' who dare to disrupt, to dream, and to build new futures.

*As echoed by **Françoise Moudouthe**, CEO of African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)*





# Commitments and Action Points

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*Following two days of rich deliberations, the alumni and partners reached consensus on key commitments and actions to advance feminist leadership and strengthen the movement. This section outlines the resulting blueprint for collective action.*

## Embrace Radical Change

- 1) **The Personal is Political:** we acknowledge the call to confront our own contradictions. Embracing radical change begins with self-reflection, interrogation and awareness. We must examine our personal politics, motivations, and practices continually. We commit to ongoing learning and reflection, knowing that it is essential for building stronger, more inclusive, and truly transformative feminist leadership and movement.
- 2) **Foster Intersectionality and Inclusivity:** We commit to cultivating an intersectional and inclusive movement where all women, in all their diversity, are fully embraced—no ifs or buts. This includes recognizing the contributions of those who may not identify as feminists but are advancing radical and transformative change in their own spaces, whether on global platforms or in private spheres. We will prioritize bringing marginalized voices into the heart of the movement
- 3) **Individual and Collective Healing:** We recognize that we carry wounds, inflicted by a multitude of oppressive systems, structural and physical violence, and harmful practices, including those within our own movements. Healing is not a luxury; it is essential to our survival and sustainability. We commit to cultivating spaces of care, well-being, individual and collective healing, where our differences are honored, and where we can grow together with empathy, accountability, and renewed strength as a movement.



## Dismantling Walls, Building Siblinghood

- 1) **Shifting from “I” to “We”:** We commit to shifting the narrative from individualism to collective action, recognizing that true liberation demands “We” rather than “I.” We will prioritize solidarity and shared ownership in our feminist endeavors.
- 2) **Challenging Performative Accountability:** We commit to moving beyond performative accountability by ensuring that our actions match our words. We will build mechanisms for genuine accountability that foster trust and action within the movement
- 3) **Cultivating Transnational and Sectoral Solidarity:** We commit to building alliances across movements, borders and sectors, recognizing that collective strength is essential to advancing social and gender justice. By collaborating with others, who share our vision for a just and liberated continent, we aim to deepen transnational and cross-sector solidarity that amplifies our collective impact.
- 4) **Creating Shared Learning Platforms:** We commit to collaborate with other movements and actors to build and organise shared learning platforms anchored on a shared values of social and gender justice. Through these shared learning platforms we will foster exchange ideas, strategies and bolster transnational and sectoral solidarity.



## Reclaiming Our Agency

- 1) **Reclaiming Our Roots:** We will reclaim our agency and reconnect our to our communities, recognizing that the power of our movement has always lived in the communities and experiences that birthed it. We will center the wisdom of those who have come before us as the foundation for our future.
- 2) **Re-defining sustainability on our own terms:** To reclaim our agency, we commit to redefine sustainability based on our experiences, priorities and aspirations.
- 3) **Reclaiming Our Feminist Language:** We must reclaim language from co-optation. We recognize the importance of communicating our work using language that invites broader participation in the struggle for justice.
- 4) **Reimagining the NGO Model:** We commit to restructuring and organizing our work in ways that more effectively bridge our efforts with feminist movements and the communities we serve. This means moving away from top-down, exclusionary approaches and embracing models that are participatory, accountable, and rooted in collective power.
- 5) **Tackling Ineffective Policies and Poor Resourcing.** We recognize that policies without real impact and the lack of resources for our own initiatives hold us back. We commit to advocating for policies that drive real change and to mobilizing resources that truly serve the needs of the movement.




## Strengthening the Ties for a Sustainable Feminist Movement

1. **Solidarity as Our Strength:** We will continue to strengthen our solidarity, ensuring that no woman is left behind in our pursuit of equality. We must bolster the bond that women have forged in the fight for justice.
2. **Harnessing Our Collective Power:** We commit to organize with purpose and intention to drive change. We must expand the feminist movement, making a place where women in all their diversity are reshaping power dynamics.
3. **Rooted in Community and Women's Lived Experiences:** Community and women's diverse lived experiences must remain at the heart of our efforts, building transformative and inclusive leadership models and policy alternatives.
4. **Shared Leadership:** We commit to fostering spaces where leadership is shared, not hoarded, ensuring that all women have a seat at the table.
5. **Innovations:** We commit to fostering innovation and leveraging art and technology to amplify our work, breaking barriers and creating new opportunities. We commit to enhance digital literacy and security for feminist leaders. We will embed digital safety, self-care, and online leadership training into our development programs to empower leaders in navigating the digital world securely.
6. **Documenting Our Feminist Journeys:** We commit to document and archive our stories, victories, failures and lessons learned. We will ensure that our experiences are shared widely through digitized, accessible resources that future generations can learn from and build upon.



## Address the Gaps: Where Feminist Leadership Must Grow

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1. **Champion Disability Justice in Leadership.** We recognize the need for greater inclusivity. We commit to ensure disability justice, cultivating inclusive language and expanding mentorship for leaders living with disabilities or abled differently.
  2. **Accountability Mechanisms:** We will foster accountability mechanisms to strengthen feminist and transformational leadership, to ensure that leadership remains purposeful, impactful, and accountable to the communities it serves.
  3. **Establish Learning Hubs and Mentorship:** Recognizing the necessity for continuous learning we will promote sustained leadership development and mentorship, fostering long-term mindset shifts and personal growth.
  4. **Tailoring Leadership Models to Contexts:** We acknowledge that one-size-fits-all approaches no longer work. We commit to ensuring that feminist leadership models are adaptable, responsive to local challenges, and inclusive of marginalized voices.

Together, these commitments lay the foundation for a sustainable, inclusive, and dynamic feminist leadership movement. By investing in strategic organizing, forging Pan-African alliances, creating shared learning spaces, and adapting to local contexts, we are building a leadership model that is resilient, rooted, and responsive. This collective blueprint reaffirms our dedication to shaping a future where feminist leadership not only endures but thrives, grounded in solidarity, intersectionality, and transformative power.

# Aluta Continua!

To build movements that can thrive amidst the current reality, we must root our organizing in feminist principles that honor the legacies of the women who came before us, those who labored, resisted and reimagined systems of power. Standing tall on their shoulders, we recognize that our strength lies not only in individual action but in cultivating communities of support that centre care, collective vision and shared purpose.

Thriving movements are born from the courage to return to the drawing board, to connect the often-disjointed dots between community struggles and boardroom decisions, and to draw critical lessons from past and present organizing. We must resist fragmentation by engaging in cross-movement solidarity; asking who is included and who is left out, and deliberately creating space for those most impacted to lead and shape the agenda. This requires the renewal of our knowledge, the courage to theorize and write our truths, and the creativity to invent liberatory paths forward.

Anchoring ourselves in niche spaces and guided by a powerful vision, we must channel our passions into sustainable strategies that not only respond to oppression but also prefigure the just, joyful, and liberated worlds we seek to build.

# In Solidarity!

*Rapporteur: Anne Waruguru Kiai- Lawyer, Writer, Women and Youth worker.*





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