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Are women human beings?"

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How far have we come as a species, in terms of our spiritual and intellectual development, if in the 21st century some can question: “Are women human beings?” The reality is that globally, whilst women may have made great strides, patriarchal attitudes prevail in a male-dominated world.

The question ‘Are women human beings?’ is the provocatively titled lecture that was scheduled to take place by the Saudi Academy of Education and Public Consultation on 1 March 2016. It unleashed a barrage of disapproving comments on social media which obliged the academy to make a public statement on Facebook. [1] “As a result of the outcry the lecture scheduled for March 1, 2016, was cancelled. As explained by the Academy the headline was chosen to attract attention.” [2]

With International Women’s Day celebrated this week on 8 March 2016, the question ‘Are women human beings?’ is an apt and necessary question. In some parts of the world, free speech, freedom of assembly, the right of women to wear what they please, or to choose whom they marry, is permissible and impermissible. Without pre-judging what the speaker intended to say on the topic ‘Are women human beings?’, the question is intriguing. Among my instant responses to the question was to turn the question on its head and pose several questions: Who is asking the question? Why are they asking the question? What does it mean to be human? Who defines being human? And, are men human beings?

In the UK where I reside, successive British governments whether Labour or Conservative have been strong allies of the Saudi monarchy and silent on the gross human rights violations of the ruling kings and princes. Saudi women cannot drive. Such British governments have also continued to sell arms to Saudi Arabia that have been used to kill innocent civilians in Yemen via a foreign policy lacking in ethics. [3]

Implicit in the question ‘Are women human beings?’ is surely a presupposition that some human beings are not human or fully human? In essence, such a position reflects a patriarchal view of the world and humanity.

NOT ALL MEN ARE SEXIST BUT MOST ARE PRIVILEGED BY BEING MALE

Whilst we live in the 21st century and much progress has been made in regards to human development in some spheres such as, electricity, wind turbines and other diverse technologies, patriarchal attitudes and misogyny continue to exist in our world in very subtle and overt forms and patterns. In the UK in the last 2-3 years, studies and news reports continue to show that women are paid less than men[4] and that domestic violence remains hidden in many UK homes.[5]

In the UK, the blogger Laura Bates initiated the Everyday Sexism Project in 2012 and did not envisage at the time it started that it would expand to include 15 countries in which women wrote of their experiences of sexism from as far as Pakistan, Iran, Brazil and Mexico.[6]

In short, there remains within the world a deep-seated belief among some men (and I strongly emphasise that not ALL men subscribe to such patriarchal views) that women are somehow, and in some ways lesser human beings than men; that what women have to contribute to society is of less value compared to men; that women’s intelligence and presence has to be tolerated and if women prove to be intellectually capable, their efforts have to be demeaned and ridiculed in order to maintain them in their subordinate place to men. To put it differently, patriarchy is about the domination of men over women, children and other men who are considered weaker; it is the privileging of men over women. It supports other systems of domination such as class oppression, or hierarchies of social status and hetero-normativity. Patriarchal ideology and attitudes continue to view women as lesser citizens; men/maleness as identified with logic, rationality, reason and women/female as identified with nature, emotion and nurturing. It is also pervasive in the practice of sexual harassment in which some men believe they can grope, assault and leer women in public with impunity on account of their ingrained belief that women exist to satisfy male sexual needs.

Sexual harassment of women has been endemic to Egyptian society and was only criminalised in 2014. In 2013 a UN study revealed that 93% of Egyptian women had experienced sexual harassment – yet it is the victims who are held responsible for their experience rather than the perpetrators.[7] Moreover, as the Egyptian police force is largely a male dominated force, it remains to be seen whether they will enforce the new law as generally male police officers tend to sympathise with the male perpetrators. Perhaps it is the case that in retraining the Egyptian police force in a session that specifically addresses the issue of sexual harassment of women in Egyptian society, the male police officers are asked to imagine how they would feel if their wife,

mother, daughter, sister, neice, or aunt was sexually harassed – would they continue to be sympathetic to the harasser? Why, therefore, do such policemen believe such perpetrators should face immunity?

South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world in relation to the rights of women, yet it is one of the countries with the highest levels of gender based violence and “corrective rape” against lesbians. In April 2008 the body of Eudy Simelane, former star of South Africa's acclaimed Banyana Banyana national female football squad, was found in a creek in a park in Kwa Thema, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. How do we account for the fact that Simelane had been gang-raped and brutally beaten before being stabbed 25 times in the face, chest and legs? As well as being one of South Africa's best-known female footballers, Simelane was a staunch equality rights campaigner and one of the first women to live openly as a lesbian in Kwa Thema. [8] How do we explain the high levels of acid attacks[9] that are used as a weapon against women in India, or the shocking tragic case of Jyoti Singh[10] , the 23-year-old medical student whose gang rape on 16 December 2012 engendered international uproar?

As Laura Bates observes: ‘Rape is not a sexual act; it is not the result of a sudden, uncontrollable attraction to a woman in a skimpy dress. It is an act of power and violence. To suggest otherwise is deeply insulting to the vast majority of men, who are perfectly able to control their sexual desires.’[11]

Rape of women is the most extreme misogynistic violation of the body of a woman and her rights as a human being, but there are other patriarchal attacks on women’s right to exist and contribute in our society that go unchallenged and are normalised.

An instance of patriarchy being challenged occurred in Britain in March 2014 when two female scientists appeared on the reputable Newsnight programme to discuss the results of the Background Imaging of Cosmic Extragalactic Polarization 2 (Bicep2), which is a specially designed telescope at the South Pole. The Daily Mail newspaper commented thus: “So, two women were invited to comment on the report about (white, male) American scientists who’ve detected the origins of the universe – giggling Sky at Night presenter Maggie Aderin-Pocock and Sri Lanka-born astronomer Hiranya Peiris.’[12] Dr. Aderin-Pocock who is of Nigerian descent, is as Prof. David Price, the Vice-Provost for Research at the University College of London (UCL), wrote: ‘a highly-qualified scientist and engineer with an exceptional talent for communicating complex scientific concepts in an accessible way.’[13] In his open letter of complaint to the editor of the Daily Mail, Prof. Price stated: ‘The implication that anything outside of [Dr Peiris’s] academic record qualifies Dr Peiris to discuss the results of the BICEP2 study is profoundly insulting.’[14]

Dr. Hiranya Peiris, Reader in Astronomy at UCL, said: ‘I deeply pity the sort of person who can watch a report about ground-breaking news on the origins of the universe and everything in it, and see only the gender and skin colour of the panellists.’[15] If Newsnight had invited two white Anglo Saxon males to discuss scientific matters, they would no doubt have not suffered the same derogatory and sexist commentary from the Daily Mail newspaper.

DESTROYING PHALLOCRATIC DISPENSATIONS

Such sexism occurs in the progressive and Pan-Africanist movements as well as in interpersonal relationships both in institutions and within the private realm. The Pan-Africanist Movement has historically been a male-led and defined movement and the contributions of African women have often been made invisible or considered less in comparison to the titanic male Pan-Africanist iconic figures. For example, in Tony Martin's 2007 book on Amy Ashwood Garvey, with the long winded title: 'Amy Ashwood Garvey Pan-Africanist, Feminist and Mrs Garvey No. 1 or A Tale of Two Amies', he writes:

'The Marcus Garveys, the W.E. B Duboises, the George Padmores, the Kwame Nkrumahs, these were the superstars occupying the very highest echelons of Pan-African struggle. But also important for the history of Pan-Africanism were the countless lesser activists of the second, third and lower tiers, many of them now half-forgotten, but all of whose lives revolved around the Pan-African ideal. Amy was certainly one such.' [16]

It is this rather gendered and hierarchical selection and elevation of Pan-Africanist 'superstars' by Martin that reinforces the notion that African women are 'lesser activists of the second, third and lower tiers' and men naturally occupy 'very highest echelons of Pan-African struggle.' Martin even fails to state which tier he believes Amy Ashwood Garvey belongs to i.e. 'the second, third and lower tiers,' that he cites.

Furthermore, in so-called Pan-Africanist gatherings, some ostensible Pan-Africanist men will interrupt, talk over women; engage in narcissistic lengthy monologues; expect women in meetings/conferences/colloquiums to be seen and not heard – or if heard, women to speak briefly, as some men pay lip service to equity and equality for women in male chauvinism. In such circumstances it remains the case that men can talk paragraphs and women only sentences. Women are an afterthought, omitted from programmes, panels, roundtable discussions and gatherings. There is also the reality that when women are disrespected in such forums by so-called Pan-Africanist men, other so-called Pan-Africanist men (and women) present, remain silent and do not challenge such practices. It remains the case that 'sexism is pan-Africanism's Achilles heel.' [17] It remains so because the ideology of patriarchy is ingrained within the unconscious and conscious thought practices, ideas, values of men (and women) which human beings are socialised/conditioned into. It becomes part of the practices, beliefs, norms, expectations that become the cultural fabric of wider society.

Many progressive/Pan-Africanist men in their Pan-Africanist politics and lived lives do not seriously engage with the intersections of patriarchy, neo-colonialism, imperialism, classism and hetero-normativity. In other words, many African men do not reflect on how they are complicit in systems of domination that not only oppress others – specifically women (and other men perceived to be weaker), but how domination of others reinforces their own oppression and is harmful to the struggle for liberation. Domestic violence, incest, child abuse, sexual harassment, are attributable to sexist and patriarchal practices that implicate black/African men. But these are the seemingly more obvious forms of patriarchy and misogyny, though they can be concealed in relationships within the home and within institutions. It is the unconscious and covert forms of patriarchy that also reinforce and perpetuate its existence, such as the so-called male progressive Pan-Africanist, Odenigbo, who in Chiamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, 'Half of a Yellow Sun',

makes eloquent diatribes yet sleeps with his house maid in his infidelity to Olanna. Often in such instances the patriarchal abuse of power follows impunity of action.

Ultimately, there is a need to develop a progressive masculinity in all men in which the male values of aggressiveness, violence, competition, that continue to fuel conflicts in the DRC, Sudan, the Central African Republic, are replaced by a willingness to genuinely listen, respect, nurture, be patient, give space to others and genuinely respect African women. War, conflict, aggression - in short, the phallocratic order as a site of power - are a severe hindrance to progressive masculine values and to a radical humanist Pan-Africanist project that seeks to empower ALL people. Feminism does not mean female supremacy; it is not a struggle to take away male power as some popular notions incorrectly perceive it to be. It is a struggle for equality for ALL regardless of sex.

Ama Ata Aidoo affirms, 'Every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development.' Too often feminism in Africa is considered to be a foreign and Western import by some African men who use this characterisation to imply that women who subscribe to 'feminist' ideas (which should be interpreted as, views that challenge male hegemony) are 'un-African,' and also gullible (which should be read that such women do not have the natural ability to think for themselves). It is similar to the way that 'African culture' and 'African tradition' are used to control and suppress the agency of African women when some men define and dictate that aspects of women's behaviour or dress does not conform to cultural expectations, as if culture cannot be adapted, modified and critiqued.

HUMANISING MEN?

Fundamental to dismantling patriarchal concepts and practices of domination is the development of what Athena D. Mutua defines as 'progressive black masculinities'[18] both in the Diaspora and on the African continent. If we are to transform the various forms of oppressions that face African people – whether it be economic, or in the form of class or sexual oppression (i.e. of LGBTI individuals), it is necessary that there is an accompanying transformation in the mind-set and consciousness of African people, particularly men and boys. Such a new consciousness must be predicated on the development of a new ideal of African masculinities that, as Mutua emphasises, 'personally eschew and ethically and actively stand against social structures of domination.'[19] This socialisation must begin not only with boys and girls but must involve the church, the mosque, the entire education system, the legal system, trade unions, the police, and the media.

If we are serious about genuinely transforming our society and the African continent in the struggle for Pan-Africanism that harnesses the economic and technological resources of Africa for African people, there is a need to seriously consider innovative ways in which we challenge all systems of domination and subordination, particularly sexism. There is a need to address the seeming invisibility of patriarchy, the social legitimisation of it, or normalisation, and the often blaming of the victims, before it can be appropriately challenged.

The arduous struggle to retain and assert humaneness or Ubuntu in a world that has become

rabidly capitalistic, individualistic, materialistic and narcissistic is an ongoing one that must ultimately be centred on sincere respect, care, compassion, freedom, justice, equity and equality for ALL human beings. It must extend to a struggle in Africa and her diaspora to destigmatise people with mental and physical disabilities as well as albino individuals who in certain parts of Africa, such as in Tanzania are killed, for they, like women are human beings and should be seen and treated as such.

ENDNOTES

- [1] See <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20160302/1035672485/woman-arab-public-protest.html#ixzz41lm0WKYq> accessed 3 March 2016
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] See <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20160130/1033975083/uk-saudi-arabia.html> accessed 3 March 2016.
- [4] See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/09/gender-pay-gap-women-working-free-until-end-of-year> accessed 3 March 2016.
- [5] See <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/30/britain-violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-funding-cuts> accessed 1 March 2016.
- [6] See <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/apr/16/everyday-sexism-project-shouting-back> accessed 7 March 2016.
- [7] See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/06/egypt-criminalises-sexual-harassment> accessed 7 March 2016.
- [8] See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/12/eudy-simelane-corrective-rape-south-africa> accessed 7 March 2016.
- [9] See <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/acid-attacks-a-scar-india-2013927165429393354.html> accessed 8 March 2016. See also, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/05/acid-attacks-women-india_n_4220712.html accessed 8 March 2016.
- [10] See <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/01/indias-daughter-documentary-rape-delhi-women-indian-men-attitudes> accessed 8 March 2016.
- [11] See “Everyday Sexism” by Laura Bates, Simon & Schuster, 2014, p. 34.
- [12] See <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/mar/21/daily-mail-accused-of-insulting-top-female-scientists> accessed 3 March 2016.
- [13] See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0314/200314-UCL-open-letter-to-Daily-Mail> accessed 2 March 2016.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] T. Martin, Amy Ashwood Garvey Pan-Africanist, Feminist and Mrs Garvey No. 1 or A Tale of Two Amies, (Dover, MA USA: The Majority Press, 2007), p. 319.
- [17] See ‘Sexism is pan-Africanism’s Achilles heel’ by MsAfropolitan, 16 March 2015. <http://www.msafropolitan.com/2015/03/pan-africanism-sexism.html> accessed 22 January 2016.
- [18] See Progressive Black Masculinities edited by Athena D. Mutua, editor, Routledge, 2006, p. xi.
- [19] Ibid, p. 5.

