



In Conversation

A space in which “vagina” is not a dirty word:
The Vagina Monologues on the GWSA listserve

Helen Moffett

The Feminist Studies Network of the Gender and Women’s Studies in Africa Transformation Project (GWSA) is a big name for an even bigger space – a cyberlist that spans not only the African continent, but its diaspora across the globe. Paradoxically, it has the ability to operate as a safe, bounded and intimate arena where activists, academics, NGOs, thinkers and even dreamers from Africa and in Africa can debate ideas, call for suggestions and support, mobilise action and celebrate each other’s achievements, all under the broad aegis of sharing information on gender.

When the African Gender Institute came into being at the University of Cape Town in 1996, one of its visions was to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a practical tool for communicating across the continent and globe in the interests of accessing intellectual capital and indigenous knowledge, and developing theoretical and practical understandings of gender in ways that are meaningful to and in Africa. A major concern was to counter the isolation of many African feminist scholars and women’s organisations (Esof and Henry, 2003).

A series of collaborative processes led to the launch, in 2002, of the GWSA project and Feminist Studies Network listserve. Members are required to abide by a short Memorandum of Agreement, which lays out the principles of the GWSA project. There are now over 140 active members, representing a diversity of interests, projects and nations. Nevertheless, the methods of selection, editing and collaboration used to create and build this space are not without omissions and contradictions, and continue to be scrutinised, evaluated and negotiated. By definition, the listserve caters primarily to those who are already privileged and enabled.

The listserve is a facilitated space, rather than a moderated one, which allows for greater flexibility and transparency than if the contents were to be subject to a filtering intervention. As a result, it is able to provide more than

simply intellectual resources – it has become an instrument for offering support and instant mobilisation in a pan-African feminist space. Thus, it has become a rallying place where condolences and congratulations are offered, where strategies for social intervention are debated and decided on within days, if not hours, and gender scholars and activists can experience the relief of expressing themselves and being heard.

The network comes into play in a number of useful ways, allowing instant transnational exposition of some of our ongoing gender contradictions and struggles.

For example, we have witnessed outpourings of support when members have been attacked or vilified for espousing causes around sexuality, for campaigning against sexual violence, or insisting on the rights to free sexual expression. Two years ago, opprobrium was heaped upon Sylvia Tamale for insisting on the Constitutional rights to equality of Uganda's lesbian and gay communities, a struggle she reflects upon in *Feminist Africa 2*. The listserve became a space for members to affirm Sylvia, but also to reflect on parallel experiences in their own countries, and to offer lessons learnt.

A similar phenomenon was seen in February 2005, when the listserve became a forum in which members from Ugandan women's organisations shared their experience of being silenced by their own government. The attempt by four organisations to stage the play *The Vagina Monologues* faced near-hysterical opposition and the banning of the performance. What might have been a silencing immediately became the opposite, as the actions of the Ugandan state were showcased as an example of the double standards held by national governments on issues of gender and sexuality.

What follows is the pooling of resources and discussion that ensued on the listserve around this issue. It offers a fine illustration of the kind of cyber-activism and solidarity that today's feminists are developing in Africa and beyond. Permission to publish this correspondence was sought from those whose words are reported here, so not as to breach the integrity of what is a closed and protected space. To preserve the authentic voices and tone of the dialogue, copyediting has been kept to the minimum. E-mails are presented in their entirety, with only the addresses removed. Contributors' names, designations and locations have been kept as presented.



-----Original Message-----

From: Ms Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

Sent: Thursday, February 17, 2005 3:14 AM

To: Mary Jane N. Real

Subject: RE: CSW [Commission on the Status of Women] Event and other updates

Hi Jane,

HOOHO! Can crisis ever end when you are dealing with women's issues!

Yes, a number of women from Uganda are coming [to the conference]. I believe they can provide a recent test case of what has happened here in Uganda. *The Vagina Monologues*!

A few months ago, three women's organisations, Isis, UWONET, and Akina Mama Wa Africa, plus Action Aid Uganda, made a decision to find ways and means of radically raising awareness in the Ugandan community that women are tired of having their rights violated, particularly their sexuality. They decided to use the script of *The Vagina Monologues* to do just that, which would also raise funds for women groups in war-torn areas in Uganda.

Mary, Heaven came down to earth!! For the last two weeks we have been fighting battles of being allowed to show the play. The whole state machinery and some faith-based organisations have been hallowing to us with all sorts of abuses! This issue has not only been referred to the Media Council, but twice discussed in Cabinet, and reported in Parliament, in the name of depicting us as immoral women who want to destroy the morals of the Ugandan people! We have been called names, and Isis in particular has been named as an organisation of lesbians! Run by lesbians! By one of these so-called "men of God" – a BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIAN!!! A pastor!

Well, the abuse to us is not an issue. What bothers us is that there are all these national and international instruments that provide us with freedom of expression, but immediately we express our concerns about our sexuality, and violence against women, then the issue of culture and morals pops out! One minister made himself look so stupid: when talking about *The Vagina Monologues*, he would refer to the word "vagina" as "that thing I cannot mention"! Look at the contradictions – he condemns the word "vagina" as an obscene word, too obscene to be mentioned in public, and he forgets that the word is in all school textbooks. He ridiculed himself in Parliament by saying "those monologues", just



to be reminded by the Speaker that the name is “Vagina Monologues”. So he thanked the Speaker for helping him to say the word!

I am giving you all these scenarios just so we can see the challenges the WHRD [Women’s Human Rights Defenders] have to face if these are the sorts of people in leadership. Much as some sectors of the community have supported us, we had no powerful defence to stand by us, not even the international human rights agencies! The sad story is that the Media Council has ruled that unless we change the title and other “vulgar words” in the script, we shall not be allowed to stage the play. For us, this is unacceptable. The real purpose of using *The Vagina Monologues* is to demonstrate that what is mostly being violated are women’s vaginas! So what else can we call it?

My worry is that next time they may not only stop the advocacy activity if it is not on their terms, but that we may face a closure of organisations, or even imprisonment. Since such machineries are now aware that they can do anything they want with impunity!

We plan to make a strong statement tomorrow.

Looking at all the time, resources and energies wasted, I have suggested to my colleagues that this could be a good showcase of the ups and downs WHRD go through, at the Commission on the Status of Women. Isis-WICCE is building up the story as it got reported in the media in a scrapbook, and if time allows, we will package the audio, to be shared at the WHRD. Do you think this is relevant to our space? I believe the print and audio text would clearly bring out the thinking of men about violence against women and women’s rights, and to me this is vital for debate, and for developing a statement to the so-called states that ratify international instruments just for the sake of it!!!!!!!

Let me know so that I can get someone to package the audio for us. All the affected organisations will be there to share it. If this is okay with you, then Isis-WICCE is willing to co-host the forum. Just confirm the date so that we can get the activists prepared.

Have a good day,

Ruth

Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

Director

Isis-Women’s International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE)

Kampala, Uganda



-----Original Message-----

From: Indai Sajor

Sent: Thursday, February 18, 2005

To: Ms Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

Subject: RE: CSW Event and other updates

Dear Ruth:

This is an amazing story – I can only say that you are now in the line of fire – but that is what happens when women bring forth women’s human rights and sexuality issues – it challenges the very core of conservative institutions and the government. You are now going through a backlash which many women’s organisations and activists have to confront in our work. You should speak at our workshop and just say these things again – it defines in many ways the work of women’s human rights defenders.

You have said it all. Let us put these cases out there and be heard.

Count yourself into the workshop – your story is compelling!

Warmest regards,

Indai Sajor

Executive Director

Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice

-----Original Message-----

From: Mary Jane N. Real

Sent: 18 February 2005 17:52

To: Ms. Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

Subject: RE: CSW Event and other updates

Thanks Ruth for the important update, and indeed I seem to have spoken too soon that the crisis is over! Anyway, as Indai said, best you attend the CSW WHRD event and share these developments with a larger audience. Bring along the print and audio clippings; if you can actually package it into a CD-video clip of about ten minutes, we might be able to show it at the WHRD event, or find a venue and time for viewing by a bigger audience. So hope to see you at the CSW WHRD event, and do invite the other women from Uganda to come with you. It’s on 3 March, 3–4.30pm at the 8th floor of CCUN.



Best,
Jane

Mary Jane N. Real
Co-ordinator, Women Human Rights Defenders' International Co-ordinating
Committee (WHRD-ICC)
Chaingmai, Thailand

-----Original Message-----

From: Ms Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng
Sent: Thursday, February 18, 2005
To: Mary Jane N. Real
Subject: RE: CSW Event and other updates

Dear Indai, dear Jane, dear ALL,
Greetings!

Thank you for those comforting words. To be sincere with you, all this time I have been responding to the violations of activists in other parts of the world. This is the first time I have had to get the feel of it. It confirms to me now that not all the so-called democratic governments are democratic!

Thank you for the space at the CSW. Sarah, of Akina Mama Wa Africa, the lead organisation in this particular V-day project, will be on the panel with us. She is planning to change her schedule to arrive in time for the panel to be part of the sharing of our experiences.

At the end of it, the play has been banned, but the media still continues to discuss it both positively and negatively. The bashing from the faith-based groups and, surprisingly, women intellectuals (!!!!) still continues.

Well, we have made a statement which I have attached.
The struggle continues!

See some of you soon,
Ruth

Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng
Director
Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE)
Kampala, Uganda



Press Release

Friday 18th February 2005

On February 15th 2005, the V-Day Host Committee met with the Media Council from approximately 3pm to 5pm, to discuss the matter of staging the play entitled *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler. We were informed that a complaint had been received and Council needed to determine whether the complaint had any merit. We were also informed that the Council was concerned about the public outcry caused by our intention to stage the play.

At the Council's request, we provided the script, background about the play, its author, as well as examples of where the play had been successfully staged. We also discussed our objectives, as well as impressing upon them the abhorrent statistics about the prevalence of violence against women in Uganda.

At approximately 7pm that day, we received a telephone call from the Chair of the Media Council [stating] that we would not be allowed to stage the play. Though disappointed with the ruling, we cannot say that we are surprised.

In view of this development, we think it is prudent to share with you some issues, which have always been at the heart of our quest to stage this play, and indeed, why we choose to participate in the V-Day Campaign.

The Host Committee, among many other organisations, works on a daily basis on issues around violence against women. We see testimonies of women in conflict areas who are abused by their so-called protectors. We see testimonies of women who have suffered domestic violence at the hands of their spouses, brothers and uncles. We also see testimonies of women who continue to suffer the effects of female genital mutilation and lack the protection of our laws. We work for an end to gender-based violence and discrimination within the private and public sphere. It is for these women that the play is intended.

The play is also intended for those of us who remain silent in the face of such suffering, and to interrogate ourselves as to why we remain silent, why we remain unmoved, why we allow these issues to be ignored, whether through banning or censorship.

We note, however, that Uganda has yet again achieved a first by outright banning of the performance. We had hoped that Uganda would be renowned for something entirely different. As with the battle against HIV/AIDS, where we as a nation chose to address the pandemic in an open and honest way, we sought to advance a campaign against violence against women in a frank and unabashed manner.



It is ironic that a vast amount of energy and resources have been spent on condemning the use of the word “vagina”, rather than on condemning the actual violations that the play clearly addresses. This is tantamount to silencing women’s voices, and is, and has always been, the major obstacle in addressing violence against women in a substantive way.

The point is that this production, like any other, has a different effect on different people. For many, it has been liberating, and for others, it has been an encouragement to continue silencing the voices of women, a sweeping of uncomfortable issues under the carpet while advancing defences such as the protection of our culture and the moral sanctity of our nation.

We were well aware that the use of the word “vagina”, a technical term, would cause discomfort amongst some, and outright hostility amongst others. Indeed, in some of the 76 countries in which the play has been successfully staged, organisers and performers have been initially subject to threats, violence, abuse and ridicule. It has spurred on some MPs in Kenya, for example, to seek amendment of the sexual offences legislation. There are many other examples in other countries, where communities have been mobilised [by the play] to deal with gender-based violence.

The issues raised in the play are of such relevance and significance to us all that we will not become mired in soothing the sensibilities of a vocal few. This play needs to be performed in its entirety or not at all.

You may also be interested to know that in the Uganda production are a number of young women who have experienced sexual violence. They saw the play in Kenya, and were determined to be a part of its production here. According to one, it transformed her life, and she is slowly rebuilding it after her trauma. There are millions of testimonies the world over to that effect.

Furthermore, rural women pushed for the play’s production in Kenya, while many elite women were totally against it. Despite the public silence of some of our colleagues, we have had numerous calls to stay our course and continue the campaign. The most generous supporters have in fact been national non-governmental organisations and individuals who have given of their time and services on a voluntary basis to ensure that these issues are put at the top of the national agenda. These include the cast, crew and the public relations team. In short, *The Vagina Monologues* is relevant to many people.

We know that a campaign of this kind does not have the massive appeal it has without having some deep resonance, as evidenced by the thousands of individuals and groups who have been able to participate in the campaign this year.



Since 1998, the event has grown from less than 100 productions to well over 2 000 in 2005.

This experience demonstrates that many need to think and rethink, to learn and unlearn. While we shall not gratuitously stage the play on that day, and thereby allow the unwarranted hysteria to continue, or succumb to running battles with those who wish to silence our voices, we shall remain focused on our objective, which is to move the issue of gender-based violence to another level, where responses that are more effective should be seen.

The V-Day Campaign will continue until the violence stops.

Thank you.



Akina Mama wa Afrika
ActionAid International Uganda
Isis-WICCE
Uganda Women's Network (UWONET)

In solidarity with women everywhere.

-----Original Message-----

Subject: [GWSAfrica] Re: Vagina Monologues
Sent: Fri, 18 Feb 2005 22:03:03 -0800 (PST)
From: Sylvia Tamale

Dear all:

Eve Ensler's controversial play, *Vagina Monologues*, was due to show here in Kampala this evening, but the Media Council slapped a ban on it earlier this week.

I just want to share my letter to the local newspapers with you.

Warmly,
Professor Sylvia Tamale
Dean of Law
Makerere University
Uganda

It Is About Freedom of Expression

Sylvia Tamale

I wish to place the furore and sensationalism over the aborted play *The Vagina Monologues* on one side and offer a different perspective on the whole saga. First of all, it is important to point out that everywhere this play has been staged, it has met with resistance. Whether it is in the US, Germany, Pakistan, Kenya, DRC, Egypt or South Africa, the play has attracted considerable resistance. Women's sexuality is a source of tremendous discomfort and fear around the world. Patriarchal states would do anything within their power to silence women that want to openly discuss their sexuality and bodily integrity – an issue that lies at the centre of women's oppression and subordination. Thus, the only difference between those countries listed above and ours is that despite the discomfort, the fundamental right of freedom of expression prevailed. In Uganda, this right did not prevail and by banning the production, Uganda joined the ranks of countries like China in undemocratically gagging its citizenry.

Baseless accusations have been levelled against the activist organisers of the play; that they are sacrificing moral standards for money. Ministers Nsaba Buturo of Information and Tim Lwanga of Ethics and Integrity owe Ugandans an explanation for their double-speak, double standards and dishonesty. If they care so much about the moral standards in this country, what did they do to condemn the 5m shilling bribe that their colleagues in Cabinet and Parliament queued up for at Mosa Courts in pursuit of the *kisanja* agenda?

It is necessary to consider some of the arguments levelled against the staging of the play. The Media Council ruled against the title of the play and cited several scenes from the play that involved “unnatural sexual acts” which in their view “offend Uganda's policies and laws.” But the Media Council should answer a simple question: Don't murder, robbery and witchcraft offend Uganda's policies and laws? How come the council has not banned the thousands of plays that are variously staged with scenes of murder and witchcraft? The truth is that the excuse of lesbianism offered a convenient justification for the Council to snuff out a play that government was extremely uncomfortable with. Vaginas and their violation are topics that government and society would rather sweep under the carpet than openly discuss.

Presumably, the Media Council finds women's sexuality more offensive than murder and witchcraft. But if this is the case, then the Council owes it to the



Ugandan public to explain why they have used kid-gloves with publications such as *Red Pepper* and *Entango*, but treated *The Vagina Monologues* with an iron hand. Could it be because it is women (and not men) talking about their vaginas? “Vagina” is not a dirty, vulgar word; it is the biological name for a part of the body of more than half of Uganda’s population.

To all those celebrating the banning of *The Vagina Monologues*, we want to sound a word of caution. Today it’s women that are gagged and restrained by the state, tomorrow it will be the FM stations, the newspapers and the anti-*kisanja* critics.

-----Original Message-----

Subject: [GWSAfrica] Re: Vagina Monologues

Sent: Mon, 21 Feb 2005 17:15:27 +0000 (GMT)

From: Catherine Ngugi



Dear all,

When Mumbi Kaigwa first produced *The Vagina Monologues* in Kenya in 2003, I applauded her courage, but felt unable to get on stage and “talk about vaginas.” But watching the rehearsal and learning what the play was really about meant that when one of the cast dropped out, I jumped in to take her place on stage. However, my telephone number had inadvertently been printed on the poster, and until the show was over, I received a slew of irate phone calls from angry men with demands ranging from “who do you women think you are?!” to “where do you women think you are?!” – (i.e., this is Kenya not America) – but also a simple “why are you doing this?”

This last man wanted me to tell him how he should explain to his little son the “pornographic” image that “you people have published in the newspaper”. Although many of the FM stations and national newspapers were initially “unable” to print the title *The Vagina Monologues* in full, some eventually came round and printed our ad, talked up our show. Given that we had not, in fact published any pornography (pornography having been banned in Kenya some time back and not in any case being an apt descriptor for the albeit provocative image that publicised the show), I could only explain to him – as Sylvia has done now [in the Ugandan press] – that 50% of the Kenyan population do in fact have a body part that is called a vagina: and that the vagina is often the focus of any violence directed at women, girls and babies. Because he was in fact a man who reads the newspapers, he was unable to ignore the growing prevalence

of sexual violence in our society – a violence which is totally indiscriminating, with victims ranging from two-year-old baby girls to aged grandmothers.

In that year, *The Vagina Monologues* was performed to an audience of a few hundred people. This year, over 70 women auditioned for the play; over 2000 people came to watch, to laugh, to cry, to pay their money to support women in shelters, women fleeing “the cut”, women – and men – who support these women with their time, their energy, their skill and their compassion. A woman MP was among the cast, and she made use of the occasion to explain the private Bill she is bringing to Parliament against sexual offenders. The Kenyan press (both leading national dailies) covered the play with more discernment and less sensationalism than in 2003 or 2004. Every woman on that stage in 2003, 2004 and 2005 was filled with trepidation because all of us know that simply saying the word “vagina” out loud is enough to bring down moral opprobrium ranging from the verbal to the physical.

I can only join Ruth in hoping that when V-Day comes around again next year, the day on which *The Vagina Monologues* is produced worldwide as part of an international campaign to end violence against women, we shall all be applauding the courageous women in Kampala who were unable to perform their show of solidarity this year. Let us hope that neither they nor the Ugandan FM stations which were such pioneers in the region, allow themselves to be cowed into silence again.

Cathi

Catherine N. Ngugi

Senior Program Officer

Research & Innovation Facility (the RIF)

African Virtual University

Nairobi, KENYA

-----Original Message-----

Subject: [GWSafrica] Re: Vagina Monologues

Sent: 22 February

From: L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Dear Ruth, Sylvia and all,

I know I shouldn't be surprised when this sort of thing happens, but I always am. Sarah had let me know about the initial refusals to advertise the



show, but only found out about the ruling of the Media Council from Mumbi over the weekend. Am a member of the Media Council here and will see what can do to get a critique out to our Ugandan colleagues ... all of our respective codes have provisions in support of gender equality and Sylvia's point in comparison to that scandalous rag is a good one to make. Think it'd be useful to get the East African media women's organisations to respond to your Media Council as well. If you can do UMWA, we'll contact AMWIK and TAMWA. And will circulate alert to our normal listserves as well. In the meantime, Ruth, please fax a copy of the media council's exact ruling over.

Warm regards,
Muthoni



PS: on the positive side, it was meant to provoke debate and, even without being performed, it's done so! Lots of opportunities to respond to the vitriol.... So, if it's any comfort, know the effort's not been entirely wasted!

L. Muthoni Wanyeki
Executive Director
African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET)
Nairobi
Kenya

References

Essof, Shereen and Henry, Joanne. 2003. "List-serving Africa's Feminist Scholars."
Unpublished paper, African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town.

Helen Moffett

is an Honorary Research Associate at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. She is also a freelance writer and editor.