

In Conversation

Women's Leadership is a Key: Fay Chung speaks with Teresa Barnes

Dr Fay Chung is well known to activists in Zimbabwe and students of Zimbabwean history. Born in colonial Rhodesia, she joined the liberation struggle in exile in the 1970s just after graduating from and working as a lecturer at the then University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Her commitment to national liberation led her to the guerrilla army camps in Zambia and Mozambique, where she helped develop a new educational methodology and curriculum for what was hoped would soon be an independent Zimbabwe. After independence came to Zimbabwe in 1980, she served as Minister of Education. Dr Chung's dedication to the ideals of women's education has led her to activism for higher education for women in Africa.

This conversation with Feminist Africa 8 co-editor Teresa Barnes, was prompted by the 2006 publication of Dr Chung's memoirs, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle*, published by Weaver Press in Harare and the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala. The conversation was conducted online between April and July 2007.

TB: Dr Chung, although you were born in Zimbabwe, your professional life as an activist and educator has always had an international dimension. Where are you currently based?

FC: I have now officially retired and I live in Zimbabwe, although I still do some consultancies in different parts of Africa. My last job was as Director of the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) located in AddisAbaba. I retired at the end of 2003. Prior to that, I worked as Chief of Education at UNICEF in New York.

During the liberation struggle, I worked in Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. I taught at the University of Zambia, whilst in Tanzania and Mozambique I was working for the ZANU Education Department.

TB: You have always fought for the cause of women's education. Do you see continuities between the days of living and working with ZANU-PF's Education Department in exile, and the work you do now to support the Women's University in Africa (WUA)?

FC: My interest in the education of women has increased, as I now see that women's leadership is a key to all forms of development in Africa. Unless we develop a strong and progressive leadership of women, we will not be able to go forward. Women in Africa have not been able to play their full role in development, as a result of feudal traditions which place women in a supportive role, with little economic and political power. Women are not well represented at tertiary level, particularly at university level, and this has serious repercussions for the type of leadership that women enjoy.

TB: Your concern for the lack of training of women must have motivated your decision to set up WUA, a private university for women in Zimbabwe?

FC: Yes, I now think that unless you specially target women, you are not going to be able to make a big difference. I began to realize this about ten years ago, so I was trying to convince others of this.

In the case of WUA, it was a group of Zimbabwean women academics, led by Hope Sadza, who took the initiative when I was still working for UNICEF in New York. I supported their efforts, and have continued to do so. These women realized that they needed to break out of the state-directed university mould, which has become so highly politicised in Zimbabwe, with the state beginning to dictate on leadership, student numbers and other matters. This contrasts to the previous situation – when I was the Minister for Education, we assiduously tried to protect university autonomy, and did not interfere.

TB: Is WUA a contact or distance education institution?

FC: So far we are doing only face-to-face teaching, but for the past two years we have been preparing to launch a dual-mode approach with some courses being available through distance education. We have started liaising with the University of South Africa (UNISA) to utilise some of their courses for our students. We have also embarked on developing our own distance education courses in areas which are not covered elsewhere, such as on gender, and on HIV/AIDS. We are going to launch the distance education components in the next academic year, beginning in September 2007.

TB: It was set up in 2002 – how many classes have graduated so far?

FC: WUA has had two sets of graduates so far. It is presently targeting mid-career women, with an average age of about 40, who missed out on university education. This is a way of addressing the fact that before independence in Zimbabwe in 1980, less than 1% of blacks could go to university, and women then comprised only 24% of the total enrolment, and now, after 30 years women are still 24% at university level! However, because of the overall

increase in enrolment, the overall number of women going to university is about ten times what it was before Independence.

TB: How many students are registered now?

FC: Presently we have about 1 000 students, 75% of whom are women (we also take men if we have adequate places). The academic areas offered at present are reproductive health; management and entrepreneurship; social studies which includes primary education; and agriculture, animal science and horticulture.

We also offer short courses for 1–3 weeks in areas such as women’s leadership and horticulture.

TB: How did WUA go about recruiting academic staff?

FC: On staff recruitment, we have had a lot of problems because of the economic crisis. Since 2002, Zimbabwe has lost 50% of its academic staff. At present, we are mainly able to recruit people who have retired (like myself) and people who have just completed their masters’ degree. This is the challenge presently facing all universities in Zimbabwe.

WUA has been fortunate enough to get a generous grant from the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) of US\$2.5 million, which will be devoted to staff development and to strengthening our courses.

TB: I congratulate your colleague Dr Hope Sadza, WUA vice-chancellor, on winning the award, “Africa’s most outstanding female in education” presented in Nigeria in March 2007 for her work with WUA. Do you think this award has translated into more publicity and support for WUA?

FC: It was wonderful that Hope Sadza managed to win this award. It has been a very hard battle for her to establish this university in the face of much opposition and many difficulties, and she well deserves this recognition. We hope that this will enable us to form better and closer linkages with other universities both in Africa and globally which specialise in issues related to the empowerment of women.

TB: The post-liberation state in Africa has been something of a disappointment for women. You have shown how the inequalities in public higher education made it necessary to set up a women’s university in Zimbabwe. Do you think that there is still a role for the model of women working within state structures for change, or should more effort go into setting up alternative networks and institutions for the education of women? It also seems that it has also proved extremely difficult to sustain non-governmental initiatives for more than a few years. Can you share any thoughts on these issues with us?

FC: One of the problems in the post-liberation state is that we tended to revert back to traditional social and political systems and values, at least this is so in Zimbabwe. Our conceptualisation of the challenges we faced focused almost entirely on the problems of colonialism, imperialism and white racism, and we assumed that if we removed these three things we would be able to develop. There was a romanticisation of the African past, the idea was that we were doing very well before colonialism and then the whites came and spoilt it all. As a result, the governments which took over after Independence kept state structures and systems as they were, and so tended to reproduce the repressive characteristics of the past. We really need to change the whole state structure and systems. What happened instead at Independence, was that most people saw themselves as apprentices, learning to do what the colonial governments had been doing, when in fact this was not enough at all.

The situation of women is an important test case. Under traditional values as well as under colonialism, women's roles were rigidly circumscribed. "Well-behaved" women accepted these values, and obeyed them. They were rewarded for their obedience. Women who chose to question these values were regarded with some suspicion. It is because of this "obedience" that we find so much tokenism within state structures – yes, there are women in state positions, but they do not necessarily wield a lot of power.

In terms of women's rights, some major gains were made. We secured changes in the laws that enabled women to inherit and own property. However, these changes have mainly benefited educated middle-class women. They are not accessible to peasant and working-class women, who are not able to use the legal system to protect their rights. Their rights are not respected, not even in the courts. In the infamous Venia Magaya case, which I mention in my book, the Supreme Court judgment was that a married woman could not inherit her father's property (whereas a married man can!). Apparently, marriage destroys the property rights of women.

The disjuncture between middle class women and peasant/working class women reflects a similar disjuncture in society as a whole. Independence was pretty good for the middle classes, but not very advantageous to the poor.

Men found it easy to exploit peasant and working-class women, and through patronage, they have ensured that more pliable and less-educated women have been appointed to positions of power. Some of the women who hold decision-making positions do not actually make decisions, but still wait for instructions from their patrons. In Zimbabwe, there is still a culture of obedience – you follow orders or else! This is part of tradition, part of colonialism, and part of the military heritage.

What I think is missing is clarity on the part of all women regarding exactly what they want to achieve, and strategic actions that will ensure that they do make these gains within a specific time. Women need to tackle the power structure, which is still embodied in the state.

There is need for greater self-criticism within the women's movement regarding the focus of our objectives. Perhaps these are middle-class aims that neglect the needs of poorer women? Perhaps we are not ambitious enough, and all too easily satisfied with ephemeral gains? Unfortunately, some of the earlier gains we did make have been lost, for example in the area of education. In Zimbabwe, we had almost universal primary education from the 1980s to the early 1990s, but this is not true any more, as only 62% complete primary education today. Similar losses were registered in Tanzania and Zambia after the initial successes after Independence, although both of these countries have now managed to regain some of the lost ground.

I think non-governmental organisations have a very important role to play in working out innovative, practicable models which can be massified by the state sector.

I also think we need new institutions because the inherited institutions are totally inadequate and backward. For example, for many people "democracy" is equated to "elections" once every five years. However, democracy is much more than that, and we do not have sufficient democratic institutions to assist us in asserting our democratic rights. There are many institutions which need to be reviewed:

- Banking systems are not geared to cater for the needs of poorer people, particularly poorer women.
- Marriage as an institution needs to be re-visited. Polygamy is much practised by wealthy men, while less wealthy men practise casual sex as a substitute, fuelling the spread of HIV and AIDS. What are women's rights to health, if her husband is practising either polygamy or casual sex? If she chooses to divorce a philandering husband, she will most likely lose her rights to see her children.
- Property and inheritance rights need to be re-examined very carefully. In Zimbabwe, women's land rights were not carefully considered during the recent land resettlement programme, whereas the land rights of white farmers received a lot of attention.
- Women's access to education remains limited, particularly at higher levels. On the question of sustaining non-governmental initiatives – I think it is

difficult because we are too donor-dependent. We need to find innovative ways to fund initiatives, such as looking for local rather than only overseas sponsors; providing services which can be paid for; being more modest and less reliant on flashy donor funded responses, etc.

TB: I would like to turn to a discussion of your views on the publication of your memoirs, “Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe’s Liberation Struggle “. To my knowledge, there is no other book written by a Zimbabwean woman about her experiences and perspectives on the liberation struggle – and it is also one of only a few written by an African woman on this topic.

What has been the general reaction to the book?

FC: As you see from the introduction written by Preben Kaarsholm [a Danish cultural historian who specialises in Zimbabwean studies – TB], I am criticised for not supporting the new “democratic” initiatives, which are the various political formations in Zimbabwe since 2000, such as the National Constitutional Alliance (NCA) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Although the MDC was originally based in the trade unions, it appeared to move rapidly towards the right, in what I see as a betrayal of the workers they purport to support. Probably this was a result of the enthusiastic support they received from all quarters, as they were the only opposition to the one-party state run by ZANU-PF. This move to the right translated into generous financial support, and to them splitting up over how the money was to be utilised.

We do need more political voices and political pressure groups, rather than the monopolisation of power by ZANU-PF. The monopolisation of the political arena has created a lot of problems: the high level of corruption in government; the repetition of policies and strategies from the past, and the demonstrated failure to find innovative responses to new challenges. The aging leadership, with the top leadership in their seventies and eighties, is alienated from more educated and younger people. Violence has been adopted as a political strategy, utilising the less-educated peasant and worker youths as the instruments of violence.

The MDC’s response has been to personalise the problems, attributing these to the “dictatorial” tendencies of President Mugabe. I personally do not see the problems as a personality problem, which can be cured by the removal of the “dictator”. I do not find this analysis to be accurate. The removal of Mugabe will not necessarily provide a solution to the problems, and if that is all we do, the problems will remain, and may even get worse.

On the other hand, my book has also met with some hostility from within ZANU-PF, as I am seen as too critical of both the past record and the present

situation. In particular, I have received a lot of criticism of my depiction of General Josiah Tongogara, whom I do see as a military genius dedicated to the liberation of Zimbabwe. What people criticise is my inclusion of his implication in killings and sexual exploitation as part of the picture. This is not acceptable in the now-sanitised picture of Tongogara as the perfect hero.

The present government does not accept any blame for the current situation, which they blame on sanctions imposed by Britain, the European Union, and the US. Of course, it is true that these three power blocs have been well organised by Britain against Zimbabwe, initially as a result of the takeover of the white farms. Blair, as you know, openly admitted that he is supporting the opposition MDC for “regime change”. The fiction imposed by the West that the stringent sanctions are only aimed at a few individuals is of course not true at all. The sanctions include closure of all bank lending facilities and investments from outside. Donors now provide food, but no development funding, as even the funding of seeds or fertilisers are subject to sanctions.

However, the truth is that many of the problems we face are also home-made. The government will not accept such self-criticism. Not surprisingly, they keep repeating the same mistakes.

TB: What prompted you to write the book?

FC: I wanted to write it for the future generations, who do not understand the past. Now there are so many partial versions of the past, such as the heroic perfection depicted by ZANU-PF, the assertions that “things were better under Ian Smith” by some whites and even some blacks. But our future must be built on a real knowledge of the past, with its successes as well as its failures and weaknesses.

I started writing it immediately after Independence in 1980, but somehow found it too painful to complete. I only managed to complete it when I was away from Zimbabwe, and could have some distance from what had happened. I did rely on various notes I have written in the past, but I did not have the opportunity to interview people.

TB: Do you see your own history differently, now that you’ve written it, than before you began?

FC: I do see that I dealt with many aspects very superficially, and they do require much more in-depth analysis. Hopefully my book will spur many other people to write down their experiences and views. I gather that there is going to be a biography of Tongogara to rebut my views, which have been termed a “caricature” by his supporters. I think Preben’s friend Wilfred Manda is also

writing something – he criticised me very fiercely, and I think dishonestly, as he was the greatest critic of Tongogara in the 1970s, but is now an uncritical admirer.

TB: The end of your book outlines a set of national development priorities for Zimbabwe. Given the extreme difficulties in Zimbabwe today, do you have any advice for those who will be following in your footsteps as activists for national development?

FC: I think it is when situations are difficult, as they are today in Zimbabwe, that real and substantive transformations can take place. I think everyone can see that the continuation of the colonial and traditional systems and structures after Independence have led us into a developmental cul-de-sac. In Japan and Germany after the Second World War, and in China after the truly traumatic Cultural Revolution, everyone had to re-examine and re-think their inheritance. This is happening today in Zimbabwe.

What can we do? What should we do? Quite a lot. Women should participate more actively in the political process, including in government. This means participation in politics, women's groups, and NGOs.

We need more training of women, and much more networking. Women are weak because we remain isolated.

TB: Finally, what advice would you give to the readers of *Feminist Africa* about the many challenges facing the intellectuals and educators who are working so hard to broaden and deepen higher education for women in Africa?

FC: I think the biggest challenge we face as intellectuals is how we are often divorced from the realities experienced – and suffered – by the grassroots women in the rural reserves and in the urban townships and slums. We may be more concerned about what is happening to us elite women, such as our promotion prospects, etc. Not that our concerns are not important – they are, but we also need to be more sensitive and knowledgeable about what is happening to women at the grassroots level. It boils down to the class differentiation within our societies – we as women intellectuals and educators need to look at the educational needs of all women and girls, of every level of society, if we are to make breakthroughs. Particular areas that require our attention are:

- Leadership education and training for women leaders, including at the grassroots, and in all educational institutions.
- Special attention to the education of girls at school. So many girls are dropping out at Grades 3 and 4 in Africa, often because they are needed as

unpaid housemaids at home or because poor families are already betrothing these little girls to richer men as fourth or sixth wives. I heard a horrible story the other day of a school girl whose parents are farm workers in Zimbabwe, and who is being forced by her parents to marry the guard on the farm. Apparently a guard is regarded as prestigious and powerful amongst farm workers. Such girls are not protected by their families, and although they can appeal to the police, I seriously doubt whether they will receive a sympathetic hearing. We need systems which can help them, based on careful research and understanding of the local conditions in each country.

TB: Thank you very much for sharing these insights with us!

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