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Editorial

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Wagadu Editorial

Kathryn Russell¹ and Colleen Kattau²

It is not enough just to open the door to the rooms of power – we have to get inside and rearrange the furniture! “Mama Mongella”³

Volume 6 of *Wagadu* presents a broad spectrum of papers on women’s activism in Africa in collaboration with the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* (JIWS) [<http://www.bridgew.edu/soas/jiws/>]. This partnership is consistent with *Wagadu*’s goals of fostering interdisciplinary understanding of transcultural gender issues and of promoting mutual efforts with journals committed to similar objectives. The essays published in this volume will contribute to the growing body of literature on women’s activism in Africa and add to an understanding of how gender is articulated within social movements and governments.

In troubled times like these, we need to keep our eyes on those who are serious about transformative change that confronts empire. We can be inspired by people like Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai whose leadership in the Kenyan Green Belt Movement goes beyond identity politics and national conflicts over resources to embrace a holistic struggle for environmental justice, human rights, democracy, and peace. Leaders like Maathai show us that we must demolish “the wealth gap between North and South,” and transcend reforms that “give formal rights to girls and women, but not substantive human rights to poor people around the globe.”⁴

“When you have touched a woman, you have struck a rock” is a South African proverb used by women in the militant, non-violent civil disobedience campaign against the pass in the 1950s. It symbolizes women’s determination, courage, and vision during the long history of resistance to oppression in Africa. With this issue of *Wagadu*, we call for solidarity with the women of Africa. What would have to happen for African women to be free of the oppression that has hindered them so cruelly? Pondering that question not only brings local, national and continental changes to the foreground, but global changes as well. The webs of greed and violence that strangle the planet and its people would have to be unwoven. The struggles of African women cannot be understood without looking at the interconnections that link the life of the smallest child in Africa with the practices of the largest global corporations.

The words at the beginning of this editorial are those of Tanzanian diplomat and former senior official of the United Nations, the Hon. Dr. Gertrude I. Mongella, President of the Pan African Parliament, the consultative assembly of the African Union (AU). Elected in 2004, Dr. Mongella is the first African woman to occupy such a high position. Her roles as Secretary General of the UN conference on women in Beijing and her leadership in the struggle for women’s freedom have earned her other honorary titles: Mama Mongella and Mama

Beijing. Dr. Mongella argues that to effectively address the goals of the AU—democracy, human rights, a sustainable African economy, an end to intra-African conflict, and a successful common market—more women than men must occupy key political offices in order to directly influence relations of power. “So we say, the time of men is up, let’s put Africa into the right direction . . . So we continue, until we fix Africa.”⁵

In the spirit of taking power and even getting some *new* furniture to replace the old, this sixth issue of *Wagadu* addresses activist roles of African women, both politically and historically. The volume offers several critical insights concerning African women in politics (Kiamba and Musandu), democratic autonomy (Tushabe), female circumcision (Boulanger), equity in housing finance (Ndinda), and the AIDS crisis (Young).

Josephine Kiamba’s work provides an overview of multiple studies of the current status of women in positions of power throughout Africa and argues that women’s approaches to leadership, which tend to be facilitation and coalition building rather than unidirectional leading, may be preferable to the status quo. However, gendered stereotypes marginalize this alternate conception of management, compelling women to adopt male leadership styles. Kiamba describes how prevailing customs and cultural norms still prohibit equitable participation in power relations, and she documents the severe underrepresentation of women in parliament, party structures, and higher education administration. While quota targets and affirmative action policies to alleviate the disparity of gender representation have facilitated some institutional change, for the most part these efforts have not been effective. Kiamba also highlights specific examples of how women’s direct activism is championing political reform in the face of reprisal and repression. She emphasizes, however, that political representation is often a shallow measure of fairness, and that cultural change is needed at all levels of society in order to realize genuine gender equity.

Kiamba’s paper is complemented by Phoebe Musandu’s focus on the career of Kenyan parliamentarian Grace Onyango who was the first female M.P. in Kenya. Musandu relates Onyango’s political success with women’s general reliance on their cultural heritage to resist colonial domination. Focusing on a national and ethnic context specific to Kenya, Musandu shows how Onyango successfully balanced ethnic exigencies with political ones, even within an essentially single party state, and she emphasizes that Onyango had to negotiate non-gendered Luo leadership norms in order to maintain power. Furthermore, Musandu shows how gender activism in the Kenyan context differs from Western conceptions of gender identity in that the former are mediated by a multifaceted arrangement of social positions that must be considered when assessing how gender issues are dealt with politically. For example, Grace Onyango considered gender concerns by contextualizing them in terms of their impact on society as a whole, regardless of sex, and this approach was successful precisely because it drew upon long-established ethnic norms.

Caroline Tushabe's article, on the centrality of women's grassroots activism as a model for "dependable democracy," underscores the key role women's organizing played in keeping Ugandan society stable during the brutal Amin (1971-1979) and Obote (1980-1984) regimes. Tushabe argues that women's maintenance of social functioning in the absence of other officially viable institutions during these years should be recognized and validated. These women served important political roles beyond the private realm to which they have been relegated. Moreover, women's successful organizational efforts must be fused with real power in order for sustainable democracy to be realized. Tushabe contends that the groundwork for viable social organization, established largely by women during those years of repression, provides a solid avenue for a genuine redistribution of power. This article calls for redefining the binary of public and private spaces along with "their assigned values of power" in order for democratic transformation to be achieved.

Sara Boulanger's historical analysis focuses on resistance to colonial rule in Kenya during the 1920s and 1930s and discusses how female circumcision became a crucial issue of contention for confronting Western political power. Boulanger's contribution reveals a "nationalization of the female body" when ideologically conflicting forces vied to determine women's position within shifting struggles for power between church, state, and colonial forces. She shows how Western campaigns to eradicate female circumcision were often based on simplistic and culturally insensitive understandings of African women's lives and their local moral worlds, and how, linked to nationalist agendas, women were often caught in a double bind in which the decision to get circumcised or not would determine their status and access to economic advancement and social approval. Ultimately, Boulanger argues, the oppositional struggles during this period laid the groundwork for a new generation of women to be at the forefront of subsequent resistance movements.

Catherine Ndinda provides an important statistical and historical analysis of women's access to housing finance both before and after apartheid in South Africa. Ndinda shows that, although the 1996 constitution included gender equality among its provisions, actual equality has not been achieved. "Black women remain at the bottom both in terms of occupational status, income and, by extension, access to resources such as capital and credit." Ndinda's analysis links race, class, and gender to demonstrate how financing a home remains a serious challenge for black women. She also provides a context for understanding how housing finance is influenced by government policy, labor market position, income, and social capital. The way forward, Ndinda argues, can be mapped by looking at how women's activism has shaped new opportunities. She provides concrete examples of women's participation in micro-credit schemes and rotating savings plans. Her contribution illuminates formal and informal obstacles that must be surmounted for full gender equality in housing to occur.

We conclude this volume of *Wagadu* with Jean Young's interview of filmmaker Paul van der Veur, executive producer/editor of the four part video

documentary series *Acceptance: Living with HIV/AIDS*. These timely videos give four Namibian women infected with HIV/AIDS a chance to tell their stories. These women represent four different faces of the epidemic in Africa, and, as Van der Veur points out, their stories stress how they are living, not dying. The video series enabled people to talk about HIV/AIDS openly, to deal with the stigmas connected to it, and to discuss social and cultural factors that enhance the likelihood of women's being infected. "I believe that by creating and airing these videos nationally, we have taken a good step along the road to creating this dialogue," says Van der Veur. In addition to having been aired twice on national television, the videos have been incorporated into the Namibian government's mobile cinema program and are being screened throughout rural areas of the country. Moreover, Herlyn Uiras (whose story is presented in the 'Makiti Aftermath' video) is touring Namibia with 'VM6' (an *a cappella* group) presenting the videos and talking about living with HIV. Women's activism is revealed in the videos by showing how women's networks create discussion groups for psychological and spiritual support and for accessing financial and medical assistance. Van der Veur believes that these networks are also important forms of community activism.

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude to the *Wagadu* collective, particularly the editor-in-chief, Mecke Nagel; the authors of these stimulating articles, and the external reviewers, whose expertise was invaluable. We also want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Dr. Andrew Fitz-Gibbon, a professor of philosophy at Cortland, whose tremendous patience made the publication of volume six possible and Justin Stewart whose web expertise was very helpful. And, last but not least, we thank David VanHamlin, the Cortland student intern in Professional Writing who worked on the editing.