



Sheena Magenya

Where are the feminists in Kenya?

After nearly ten years of living, loving and working in Namibia-at the end of 2012, I found myself having to head back to my homeland Kenya. I was in a state of riotous emotions because while technically Namibia was not 'home' for me, ten years is a long time and it had in many ways become home. But at the same time I was excited to go back to Kenya and see what had changed, or as I found out upon arrival-what hadn't.

In Namibia, I was a passionate 'out' feminist, and never shied away from confronting sexism, bigotry or any other injustice that had the misfortune of crossing my path. In the safety of the Sister Namibia office I knew I could express radical feminist ideas and opinions and I would have immediate and equally passionate support. Maybe it's because I have only been in Kenya for all of three weeks, and maybe it's because I have been busy dodging allergies-but here I feel incredibly alone in my feminism. Don't get me wrong-accepting and adapting a feminist approach to life is not like joining a club where you expect all the people in it to 'have your back'. Feminism is largely a journey that you undertake alone, with the hopes that you will learn to value your worth and place as a woman beyond stereotypical assumptions and expectations of women-and men too. So as I sit in my parent's house and nurse an asthma attack, my only connection to wider Kenyan opinions on life, politics and society is of course the radio, television, newspapers and the internet. After reading, listening and watching for a little over two weeks-I have

to ask, where is the feminist voice in Kenya? Social commentary is littered with sexist and homophobic content that I don't see anyone trying to challenge.

A popular local radio station has a show that focuses on relationships. Interestingly, the few times I have tuned in to the show, the stories that Kenyan women have to tell are heartbreaking to say the least. One woman tells of how she was in a relationship for 16 years with a paranoid man. For almost all 16 years of the marriage, she was not allowed to have her own bank account, even though she worked. She says that her husband's reasoning was that if she had access to her own money, she would use it for entertaining other men. On top of that, after a hard day's work she was not allowed to take a shower before her husband came home. Why? He had to come home and inspect her privates to make sure that 'no one else had passed there'. Sometimes he would carry out a full vaginal exam, just to make sure. The woman moved jobs and lived 100 kilometers from her husband. Even then, he would make weekly, sometimes bi-weekly visits and carry out these tests. Fortunately she is no longer with this man, but she says that the experience has left her traumatised. On and on the phone calls kept coming in, with woman after woman attesting to the same. Many of these women are educated and people with means of leading independent lives, but still live trapped lives in abusive, loveless relationships.

When other women call in to offer advice, a lot of it is either for the women in these relationships to pray about the situation, or change themselves in one way or the other. No women call in and challenge the behavior of the men. There is a certain acceptance in society that boys will be boys (and men will be men) and that women have to change themselves and their lives to accommodate the abusive and misogynistic whims of these men. It is heartbreaking.

A light at the end of this tunnel of abuse is a show that names and shames (mostly male) absentee parents, and asks them to step up to their responsibilities. I guess it's not all lost. But this has opened my eyes to the fact that feminisms' work, in many places, is yet to even begin, and that there is a lot that needs to be done for women all over the continent. I'm so pleased that Sister Namibia still exists as a feminist platform for sharing and expression for me in as far away as Kenya. With that I guess-aluta continua.
