

All the key people including our indefatigable Mama, President of the Pan African Parliament, veteran gender and Women's rights activist, Hon. Gertrude Mongela ;Muthoni Wanyeki , head of the Kenya Human Rights Commission and many battle hardened sisters and younger activists, in the national and pan African women's movement, members of parliament, regional multilateral organizations and CSOs were present. It was not just the sisters who were there. There were those like Hon. Mongela who acknowledged the presence of 'enlightened men' including my controversialist brother, Prof Makau Mutua and cantankerous brother Brian Kagoro.

The issue of gender based violence against women deserves the attention of all of us. It is widely decried yet it persists in spite of many national, regional, Pan African and international laws, conventions and protocols. Many governments are either unwilling or unable to enforce them and stop the systematic violence meted out against women every day. There are many sources of this violence; structural, economic, social, religious, cultural, and the plainly gratuitous raw power inflicted simply because the perpetrator can do it, with impunity. The conference reviewed the numerous laws and protocols that exist and examined why they are not being implemented. To end the impunity the conference identified a 6-point strategy: "ending impunity through accountability and implementation; centering on women survivors of SGBV; mobilizing popular support; securing adequate human and material resources; building bridges across sectors and within movements; and developing a new cadre of leadership".

One of the key challenges about continental and sub regional protocols like the Women's protocol of the AU is that countries ratify them at the Pan African level but do not domesticate them within the national laws thereby denying the justifiability of the protocol at the national level. But that is only partly true because in many countries even national laws are not being enforced. It is one thing to have good laws it is another for people to be aware of them, use them and enforce them. It is not just about the legal position but also the socioeconomic, cultural and political environment whether they enhance and empower victims to come forward or discourage them. Is the society more tolerant of abusers than being sympathetic to or defending the victims? Take the controversy in Uganda a few years ago. The Vice President of the country then, Dr. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe, revealed to the public that she had been a victim of domestic violence. Her husband was not an illiterate but an Engineer. In spite of her powerful position the husband never saw beyond 'this is my wife' someone he 'paid cow on'. Some of the negative reaction she got was not just from men but other women who accused her of embarrassing her family. Sections of the clergy even suggested she should have spoken to her priest! That experience showed that even economic and political power does not fully liberate a woman because the domination and oppression is anchored on cultural and religious manipulation and attitudes of society. Why should marriage so infantilize a woman that she could be beaten like a child and treated like a slave? The children Rights Convention does not even allow corporal punishment of Children and bars other forms of physical and emotional torture. So where do Men derive the legitimacy of the whiplash, jackboot, their fists and sometimes Panga and other lethal weapons deployed against women from?

Rape is probably the worst of all the violence that women suffer. It is not just in war times that women are raped but in so called 'peace' times. Can we imagine the millions of rape in marriage/ other relationships that are being perpetrated every day which we never speak about? How many Africans will countenance the legal case for rape in marriage? How can you rape your own wife many men and even some women will wonder? There are too many ambiguities in our attitudes towards sexual and gender based violence. The personal is indeed political therefore combating it begins with us as individuals. No matter how comprehensive the laws are human beings, men and women must be willing to change their attitudes and adopt zero tolerance towards any abuse, violence, disrespect, demeaning behavior and denial of human rights to women. No culture or traditional values or religious misrepresentations should be used to justify treating women as second class citizens. While it is important for women to have autonomous spaces to discuss these issues and strategize on how to surmount them it is also of crucial importance to create more shared spaces where these issues are discussed with the real and potential perpetrators of the violence: Men. The discussion needs to extend beyond the politically correct men who are very small in number and needs to be constantly challenged to practice what they preach and engage other brothers.

A strong man does not need to beat/abuse/intimidate his mother, spouse / partner, sister, daughter, niece, friend, colleague, house girl, secretary or any woman, to prove his strength.



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