

What African Green Feminist Power Has to Offer

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November 17, 2022

For far too long, narratives by donors, development agencies, and environmental organisations in the Global North have paraded pictures of helpless women and girls on the African continent. What these representations fail to capture is that many of these women are fighting for their material needs and the structural inequalities causing them in the first place. As the climate crisis intensifies on the African continent, Anika Dorothy and Lydia Hiraide look to the rich history of intersectional environmentalism of the continent.

Climate change and environmental breakdown are increasingly talked about as some of the most pressing issues of our time. Nowhere are these issues more urgent than across the African continent. Much of the continent has already seen a 1 degree Celsius increase in temperatures since 1901, with devastating consequences such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and increasing droughts. Crucially, not everyone is affected by this spiralling climate crisis in the same way.

Within many countries, people who are already experiencing poverty, poor health, food insecurity, and social discrimination are bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. Women are over-represented in these statistics, and often experience the compounding effects of these inequalities. They are therefore the hardest hit by the accelerating climate crisis.

Women from within green movements across Africa have been highlighting and responding to these inequalities on both local and global scales for many years. From this perspective, green struggles across Africa have a distinctly feminist character.

Gender and climate change: what's the link?

Climate change is a multiplier of social issues, and as gender inequality is pervasive, the climate crisis is especially burdensome for women. With limited access to healthcare and resources, women and other minoritised genders face a host of negative outcomes such as death from extreme weather events. Women's labour is behind 80 per cent of the African continent's food production. A changing climate thus threatens their livelihoods and undermines the food security of not just their families but their wider communities. A UN analysis shows that 80 per cent of people displaced by climate change are women. Where a changing climate and environment force people into displacement, women experience increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence. Globally, and in Africa, the majority of people living in poverty are women, affecting their capacity to adapt and respond to all of these issues.

Moreover, the different roles that women hold in their communities expose them to specific harms in a warming climate. For example, women and girls are often tasked with collecting

water for their households. However, more frequent and extreme droughts affects their capacity to fulfill this duty, exhausting women and girls who have to walk further and longer to find clean drinking water for their families. Some girls in these circumstances forfeit school to collect water. Women in African countries such as South Africa and Cameroon face this challenge, with 1 in 3 African citizens already being affected by water scarcity today. Water scarcity is just one gendered impact of climate change. As such, serious conversation and action on the gendered impacts of climate change cannot wait.

Creating effective, equitable ecological policy requires key decision-makers to address the gendered dimensions of climate change and environmental breakdown head-on. Without a feminist approach which values local voices, projects and policies designed to deliver on these issues can actually reinforce gender inequality. All too often, women – especially across Africa – are excluded from local and global decision-making and crucial knowledge-production processes. Too many powerful decision-makers see women in African countries as passive recipients of top-down designed policy frameworks. They make the mistake of ignoring that these women are key actors who can actively feed their direct experience and knowledge into the creation *and* implementation of holistic policy. Ensuring that these women are included in green solution-making processes from the beginning will contribute to remedying this problem. As we will see throughout this article, these girls and women affected by these issues are using their knowledge and first-hand experience to fight for a greener future.

Green feminist organising across Africa

With 54 countries on the continent, green feminist organising in Africa is multi-fold and diverse. But one thing remains constant: the effort to connect the multiple threads that make up the climate and environmental emergency with a feminist approach that is sensitive to political, social, and economic inequalities.

The work of many non-governmental organisations led by and for women, such as WoMin and Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre, is extremely significant in this space. At the same time, many smaller, more local organisations are leading community-based campaigns to ensure that women and their environments are protected and respected.

Today, in Senegal, the Khelkom Women Fishers Association is fighting against the expansion of the extractive fishmeal and fish oil industry in their communities. They are emphasising the importance of preserving local fishing cultures and the jobs of women who are stewards of these cultures. In Cameroon, L'Association de défense des droits des aides ménagères et domestiques(the Association for the Defence of Domestic and Household Workers) is fighting against agro-industrial projects requiring deforestation in local communities. They highlight how these projects, which place profit over people and the planet, affect indigenous communities, women, and non-human animals negatively. In South Africa, Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA) has been exposing the gendered impacts of mining and challenging governments and mining companies placing profit over people and the planet.

African feminist leadership directs our attention

*to these intersections of material, cultural,
political, and social inequalities.*

African feminists are also working across borders to host crucial events such as the West and Central African Women's Climate Assembly in the Niger Delta, where women's organisations and ally NGOs are joining together from countries as far and wide as Guinea Conakry, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria. Ahead of COP27, these African feminists were working to keep the conversation about feminism and environmentalism firmly on the agenda. These women – many of whom have experienced the daily harms of pollution, environmental destruction, and climate change – are ensuring that “voices of African women” are heard at the “African COP”.

And the borders don't just stop at the African continent either. In October 2022, African and African-descended women organised the first Black Ecofeminist Summit in London, highlighting the transnational connections and solidarity between African green feminists both in the diaspora and on the continent. All of these women, and many more, continue the work of many who came before us, like the women of by The Federation of Ogoni Women's Association of Nigeria (FOWA) and the Green Belt Movement.

African women's legacies in the green movement

Women across the African continent have historically organised at the intersection between women's rights and environmental protection.

One of the trailblazers of the African green movement was Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Green Belt Movement Wangari Maathai. Her activism began in the 1970s as a response to women's unemployment, their exclusion from conservation, and the environmental degradation that were exacerbating crop failures, malnutrition, and droughts. By teaching women how to grow seedlings and plant trees on their farms and in their communities, she educated them on farming responsibly as well as equipped them to participate in forest conservation which was historically reserved for men. By remunerating women for their work, Wangari Maathai helped them gain access to necessities such as clean water and energy for cooking.

With Kenya taking an autocratic turn under President Moi, the second president of Kenya, Wangari Maathai's intersectional environmentalism became political, connecting the movement to various struggles that made justice for all elusive for many years. From 1989 to 1992, she campaigned against the building of the huge *Times* complex in Uhuru Park in the Nairobi Central Business District. Soon after in 1992, she went on a hunger strike with the mothers of political prisoners to advocate for their release. In 1998, she protested the government giving Karura forest on the edge of Nairobi to its political allies for their private houses. During these protests, she was often injured and hospitalised.

As Wangari Maathai was one of the few outspoken leaders against the government's ethnic politics and gender discrimination, and an effective organiser, the government arrested and tried her on multiple occasions with sham charges and subjected her to ridicule in parliament. The government also cracked down on the Green Movement in an attempt to

strangle it out of business. Despite this fierce – and sometimes violent – opposition, Wangari Maathai fought for her beliefs and exhibited incredible skill in connecting the dots between gender equality, peace, democracy, and environmental conservation.

Her leadership style has often been called radical transformational leadership which, though many do not have the stomach for, was very effective in halting destructive actions by the Kenyan government and citizens. Wangari Maathai consistently put her passion for conserving the environment and bettering the lives of women and all Kenyans before herself.

Such sacrifices are also exhibited by FOWA, which is considered one of the most effective women's movements in Africa. FOWA's key objective is to ensure environmental justice and cultural survival. Founded in 1992, FOWA put Nigerian women at the forefront of the fight against exploitation by the oil company Shell. Shell had been operating old equipment that leaked oil and dangerous gases into the atmosphere and farmlands of the Ogoni people. And many women and girls suffered health complications such as cancer, ovarian cysts, miscarriages, and early menopause as a result of this pollution.

In January 1993, FOWA mobilised 300,000 of the 500,000 people who occupy the Ogoni region to protest nearly four decades of exploitation by the Shell Oil Company. In addition, they provided follow-up activities to help women and girls who had been negatively affected by the chemical leaks. The actions that the women of FOWA took in the early '90s were not without serious consequences. Amnesty International has documented the violence that the women defending their land faced at the hands of the Nigerian military and companies hired by Shell. Despite this, FOWA continued to organise peacefully for environmental justice and a safe environment. Thanks to their organising, Shell is no longer operating on Ogoni land. Nonetheless, significant damage to Ogoni land remains and the women's legal struggles continue.

Without a feminist approach which values local voices, projects and policy designed to deliver on these issues can actually reinforce gender inequality.

Key challenges for green feminist organising in Africa

Green feminist organising in Africa is dynamic and widespread. But it is not without challenges. One challenge that green feminist organising in Africa faces today is building compelling and persuasive narratives for intersectional climate action. For far too long, narratives by donors, development agencies, and environmental organisations in rich countries in the Global North have paraded pictures of hungry, broken children in a desert or blurred videos of girls who had to suffer FGM and early child marriage to provide for their families. These narratives have not only exhausted audiences who might otherwise be won over by the cause of feminist green organisers, but they give little credit to women's environmental leadership that responds to these challenges. Green feminist organisers on the ground are exposed to the agency that women at the frontlines of the climate crisis

show every day. Amplifying these actions can push against the abstract and negative representations of Africa, encourage local ownership, and attract targeted funding support and solidarity beyond national borders.

Another challenge is the political backlash and the danger that follow challenging the patriarchal structures of regimes with authoritarian tendencies. Much like in Wangari's lifetime, green feminist organisers petitioning local governments today to end land grabbing face violent retaliation. In many African countries, it is dangerous to petition national governments on human rights or advocate for forest conservation as demonstrated by the death of Johanna Stutchbury in Kenya.

Yet another hurdle for organisers is building a truly transnational and intersectional movement. With 54 countries on the continent of Africa, building these transnational connections is an especially challenging task but effective climate action depends on it. Climate and environmental issues do not respect national borders. As such, any effective solution building for the African continent will need to be open to working across borders. The specificity of local contexts will mean that attention to detail and difference are absolutely crucial. Feminist organising requires an understanding that gender is not a standalone axis and can, indeed, intersect with other social axes such as disability and class to shape our experiences of and responses to climate and environmental change. At the same time, identifying similarities and resonances across borders could be a way to build solidarity and a Pan-African movement.

Certainly, the challenges facing the continent are multiple. And looking at the organising of pioneers like Wangari Maathai and FOWA reveals how shockingly similar these challenges are. But as Wangari Maathai wrote in her memoir, *Unbowed*: "there are opportunities even in the most difficult moments." The exercise of looking back is helpful for identifying these opportunities as well as drawing lessons. The work now is to carry this energy forward and ensure that the knowledge and experience of African feminists within the green movement are genuinely included, heard, and actioned.

A green feminist agenda for Africa

Beyond COP27, the struggle for a more peaceful, equitable, and ecologically sustainable future continues with great urgency. The Senegalese climate and social justice advocate Awa Traoré reminds us that "we need to start fighting with a *joint agenda* that will do good to the environment and keep justice and humanity at the centre of our struggle to overcome the climate emergency".

Indeed, it is this *joint agenda* which is key. The climate challenge is one which is made up of intersecting issues. African feminist leadership directs our attention to these intersections of material, cultural, political, and social inequalities. It urges us to understand the complex, multi-layered nature of the climate beast and demonstrates a dynamic will to tackle all the moving parts together at once. Hence, African women like Marie Christina Kolo (Madagascar), Adenike Oladosu (Nigeria), Vanessa Nakate (Uganda), Titilope Akosa (Nigeria), Ruth Nyambura (Kenya), and Mariama Sonko (Senegal) are talking about and working towards multi-pronged solutions which include: tackling poverty, increasing educational opportunities for girls, centring indigenous knowledge and practices in creating climate solutions, strengthening democracy and women's inclusion in decision-making

processes, and rejecting outdated and oppressive gendered norms which limit women's access to important services and resources.

Vitaly, African feminists in the green movement are working to move us towards more democratic solutions that place the voices of affected people at the forefront. Moreover, they stress the necessity to continue evaluating and assessing policy from the perspective of frontline communities currently tasked with adapting and responding to their changing environments. All of this whilst stressing, with urgency, the need not only to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate but to also work towards *preventing* these conditions from multiplying and worsening in the first place. It is only through radical restructuring led by a feminist politics can we arrive at the genuinely greener future that so many of us desire.

This article was developed under a 1.2 Diaries project that aimed to understand the green movement in Africa.



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Published November 17, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/what-african-green-feminist-power-has-to-offer/>

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