



Amina Mama

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CTM: Okay so it's April 5th, 2015 and we're here talking to Amina Mama. So Amina, how about you begin by telling us a little bit about what brought you to the kind of feminist work that you do. What inspired you—whatever stories—

AM: That's a lot of different ways of telling that story.

CTM: Right.

AM: As Chimamanda once said, famously on the TED talk, the dangers of the single story—your question is a challenging one. I think when I was—I mean it's a lifelong thing. So I can trace it all the way back to my childhood in Nigeria. Growing up and being in schools there and noticing the gender differences. I went to a mixed primary school and then a high school, which had a whole range, multi-ethnic, multi-religious young women by that time. And quite a lot of the women, you know I was at school with, left to get married, very young, without completing education. And I came from a different—this was in the north of Nigeria—and I came from a relatively liberal family, so you know that was not on my tracks. And the other thing...so one was what happens to women in terms of their careers and what I saw as truncated careers because these young women would get married and then be, largely, in seclusion, depending. And it was clear my path was going to be different. And then I think the second thing was the class thing. I grew up in a relatively middle-class family and you know if you live in any third-world context, it's pretty much the same, but all around you, if you're observant, there are these very sharp contradictions. You see people living, on the one hand, extremely affluent lives and on the other hand, you're surrounded by the evidence of poverty. So that sharpness, I used to find upsetting. So I think that's probably where it began, and then particularly seeing what was happening to women, always working, always struggling, always surrounded by children. There's an early story that I think had a profound effect on me, which

was the story of—this is years ago, probably in the late ‘70s—a story of a young woman, I remember her name—called Hauwa Abubakar—who was given in marriage to a much older man and ran away from her new marriage. Of course, her family returned her and she ran away again and they returned her and she ran away I think the third or fourth time and her family returned her and her husband beat her so badly she had to have her legs amputated. So at that point, Women in Nigeria, which was at that time a socialist feminist organization distributed across Nigeria, had lots of chapters but—in the north we took up this issue and you know did the research, did the activism around it and one of the things that came to mind or came to attention was the fact that the reason her family—it’s not that you know African families don’t love their daughters—the reason her family had to keep sending her back was because they were indebted to the husband, who was the landlord. So there you can immediately see the linkage between gender and class. So that stayed with me.

CTM: When was that?

AM: This was in late 1970s, mid to late ‘70s. So that I remember as a critical moment, at home in Nigeria, becoming very aware of both class and gender. And I think the war experience—the Civil War broke out when I was about ten years old and witnessing the early part of that—because it did start in Kaduna, the town where I grew up, with the pogrom. The things that Chimamanda writes about—

LEC: Right.

AM: —from the southeastern side. So I think witnessing people fleeing en masse from state violence, from mob violence, and having, you know the neighborhoods where we lived and people mixed, raided by gangs who were searching out and slaughtering people, and hiding someone under my bed while this was going on. So, I didn’t at that time think about gender but the memory of it is all these women with children and loads at the station.

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My mother was there, giving them tins of milk and things to get on these trains that would flee back to the east. But realizing how war was particularly, well, at that time it was just violence, was particularly affecting poor people and women and then the ethnic lines, the religious lines became very salient. So that’s part of my childhood background and I think if you witness that kind of thing you naturally develop a lot of questions about how society is arranged, how it’s divided, what happens to different groups of people in those fairly extreme contexts. So I think that was important. The second thing I think that kept me thinking and developing radical ideas was of course the kind of—was actually in the West, initially, joining study groups and I was a member of the early Black Women’s Movement. By this time I was studying in Europe, so we’re talking about a completely different location and getting involved in

anti-racist struggles. The early '80s was a time of a lot of inner city violence in London 1981, the so-called Brixton riots, which we all call the uprisings. So that involved me in a lot of community level politics through the Brixton Black Women's Group which at that time was very political. That's where I read Lenin, Marx, Mao, Rodney, Fanon, Cabral, you know. So, the things that have informed me are not what I've learnt in school. They're what I learnt through—

LEC: Outside.

AM: —being in those study groups. I learnt about Claudia Jones for the first time. There used to be a picture of her on the wall of the first Black Women's Center in London. So all of that was happening in two locations and I moved back and forth between these locations. So, I got very aware of what was going on in the prisons, what was going on, how black people were being rounded up and essentially fixed. Because you know the same policemen would testify against people arrested at five different locations. So it was set-up like that. It was shattering at the time but I learnt about how the British bobby actually could manifest in black communities, en masse, heavily armed up, new kinds of trunches and I witnessed the violence. So a second kind of violence in the metropolis, and I mention these because later on, many years later, my focus has remained with violence and militarization and how that affects women, how that affects poor people. So that's sort of both where I grew up and where I got a lot of my education. While I was doing those, I traveled, I hitchhiked around a lot. It took me to places where revolutionary things were happening and being sabotaged. As a student I went overland across Turkey, Iran, to Afghanistan. Because Afghanistan had just had this little socialist revolution. And what I saw there completely lead the scales to fall from my eyes because I saw what was happening there and then I went back to the West and saw the media coverage and I was just appalled. Because at that time there was already...it was the cold war, so you had the Russians, at that time invited in as advisors. But at the same time all the mujahedeen were being supported by the West, as the sort of...you know that story, bulwark against communism. And I saw Afghan women at that time in the short revolutionary moment in banks, on the streets, not veiled, and the contrast between that and what happened since with the militarization and the rise of the Taliban and the dire consequences that had for women. So that was one moment. The other moment was—I went to your part of the world. I went to the Caribbean and I had a Caribbean friend who grew up with me in Nigeria and we went together to Grenada and witnessed the Grenadian revolution and that was probably the most inspiring moment in the '80s, when Bishop and Jacqueline Creft—so that and meeting him. I was completely captivated by what they were doing, and again, the prominence of women in that revolution. The Ministry for Women, the fact that the Minister of Education was a woman and all over they had all these like, murals, women for freedom, women in defense, women in production, so very much a socialist revolution that placed women front as very much involved as equal partners.

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So, but then the conscientization in terms of global politics was what happened to that revolution. I can remember driving down the street and hearing that Maurice Bishop had been killed and the shattering of that dream, which was at the time very, very distressing and devastating. Now I look back and think well, that was definitely—those two moments were signs of what was to come—

LEC: Oh, yeah.

AM: —in terms of what was happening to revolutionary politics, to radical women's organizing in both of those contexts. So those were some of the factors. You're taking me right back!

LEC: Yeah. And it's interesting that at the same time, right this is when Thatcher and Reagan—

CTM: Right.

AM: There you have it!

LEC: Neoliberalism took off!

CTM: Took off.

LEC: Neoliberalism took off. They had a vision of what kind of states they wanted.

AM: Absolutely. And I think Thatcherism is when the violence was breaking out in London. At the same time I was visiting Nigeria and we had a series of coups over structural adjustment, each corrective regime as these military coups name themselves, was promising not to do SAP because of the devastating effects it was having on the public sector which the vast majority of people in Africa depend on for health, education, water, all the basic things. So at that point, in an oil economy—the sharpening divide. So people in Nigeria were very conscious. They resisted and fought back against SAP. The students were out, there was a lot of popular resistance. But the military of course, deal with that in their own particular way. And each regime, I'm thinking of two in particular, were going to not impose SAP but then they came back with even more draconian measures which was really in the early 80s. The advance of what we now call neoliberalism. And of course the gendered impacts of that are very, very clear. So seeing the public sector was where women moved from farming work and street hawking work and trading work into professional employments.

In particular, take something like education. Women were the pioneers of education in Africa, I would say. So losing...as that sector diminished—first of all, women who had got into the modern sector quite late after Independence were displaced back

into...let's fund them to do micro-enterprises everywhere but forced back into the informal economy, so that was pretty devastating in terms of women advancing into the classes that would be doing governance ruling and so on. And then the second thing of course is when all those services got undermined. The burden of all that care work, what we now call the care economy, in those days we called the reserve army. The women were disposable in the economy. So I think that was certainly key. Even at that time, you could see what was happening in black communities and what was happening in African countries. They were both differently experiencing what was actually I think piloted in Africa first, because it started there in the 70s where it did lead women to mobilize in the first AAWORD. The Association of African Women for Research and Development was a response to what modernizing development, industrialization—how it was compounding women's marginalization. So, there was that kind of action beginning on the continent. A few years later there was all this dissent, which manifested in anti-racist activism. So I think, that link and the need for feminism to be more than just local.

CTM: Right.

AM: The primary manifestation was in local, around local issues. But as someone who traveled it was very clear that these things had their linkages.

LEC: And you saw the patterns throughout the world in the 80s.

AM: Later. Later on and I can look back and see it because we've seen it much more nowadays, it's clear that's why we talk so much about transnational strategies in the women's movement. But at that time I was just experiencing these things and participating in some of these struggles. So, it's later, I can look back and see how that led me to very much a transnational understanding of the forces against women.

CTM: So, Amina, how would you say that your work has contributed to sustained change in women's lives?

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AM: That's a really important question for all of us. Actually I can't think about it in terms of my work because, all the things that have been of value that I can look back on and indeed plan forward on, have been about developing communities of shared ideas. So it's always been—you know as an individual, maybe you can write something but I don't think that does much transformative—so it's really been about working in groups and organizations and creating those here and there. And using those—I mean why do we make organizations? We make them to do more than what

we ourselves can do as individuals. So I think it's only collective action that really can make change; one. And in terms of what we've been able to do, I think we have always confronted one particular major challenge that comes from living in an unjust and unequal system. Our movements have those challenges within them because we people are formed in those environments. So within movements is where we have to change ourselves as well as achieve things for women. But I think the biggest challenge has been those divisions. Call me old fashioned but the thing that carries through across the shifts from ethnic to religious, and whether you're looking at within women and gender, it's class.

LEC: Right, right.

AM: It's class. And in a world of growing inequality this challenge gets more and more difficult. So, first of all, the point about collective mobilization, so there's very little...and many of us are big individuals, and over individualistic so this needs underlining. But in terms of what women have benefited, why I mention that is because some women have benefited. Some women are obviously beneficiaries of what women's movements have done and that includes us.

CTM: Right.

AM: It also includes a lot of women who've succeeded in various disciplines, in various professions. In Africa the focus has been on getting women into power, into government. And you know we've got in some countries and I want to say it's a few countries, we've got large numbers of women. And the current debate right now is exactly here. It's about, these women got into power on the back of all our struggles; one. We pushed them there; two. Now they got in there and there's a big sort of critique around. Yet, somehow they're not effective in terms of women's interests. And that's to do with the systems they are trying to move forward in. And of course they fall by the way. If you want a political career you have to form alliances with the patriarch.

CTM: Right.

AM: So, the failure of that in terms of changing other women's lives. You can certainly see that their lives have changed but the delivery has been very flawed and it is again because of class. And when they move into a power structure they also move up class-wise. And that disengagement—part of it is systemic; part of it is who people are and how press people really want power. And of course, we women should want power. But of course we could be more powerful if we would carry more women with us. So the most effective women politicians, I mean I think of someone like Pregs Govender, in South Africa who carried a feminist agenda and mobilized beyond the parliament, in order to bring change in the parliament. So, I mean, some of these examples show us, if only all of us paid more attention to them. They show us what

needs to be done. Yes, you need to get women in power but that continuing connection to collective mobilization outside structures that are poisonous, quite often inimical to women and certainly inimical to women who are feminists, who actually do want to change beyond their own career, beyond their own structure. So I want to say that each gain we've made and we've made huge gains, but they haven't been massive, they haven't transformed ordinary women's lives. And that, I say it's a failure because it's always been on the agenda. It's what we've always wanted to do. But with each advance and I think it is because the world has changed with globalization, with neoliberalism's advance. The fragmentations and divisions have become much sharper. And what we achieve by getting significant numbers of women into the state, we need to know that the state is no longer the main arbiter of development. So we have to change strategy if we want to make a difference. And a lot of the discussions on the African continent now within the women's movement are firstly much more overtly feminist and secondly, looking at exactly that question. So how do we make women one, more powerful and secondly, accountable? How do we keep that link instead of letting the system re-divide women?

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Women from women's movements have gone into politics and then been unable to deliver to women beyond...or not deliver enough, I mean they delivered many policies and many things but then those have to be implemented and they're differentially realizable. Very poor women still can't use the law against domestic violence, whereas middle class women can better access the resources to capitalize on the things that we've won through very hard struggle. So the reappearance of these divisions, is what has sabotaged the visionary agendas of feminism which are about transforming ordinary women's lives. It's just that the system's a lot tougher than any of us could imagine. And we never foresaw the displacement of Third World states by corporate interests; and the global link-ups between militarized states and the US as an obvious, the most powerful example. Now these global networks of corporate leaders, military...you know, these so-called training units and a military and a corporate global elite, militarized and globalized. And all of our majority of people are suffering new levels of abjection and despair and whatever we've done this thing is getting worse, so clearly it's a time that we have to really remobilize if we want women to benefit at all from the last couple of centuries of activism. And immediately, especially the last half century.

CTM: Do you think it has something to do with the kind of feminist ideas that we have in the global South been able to popularize or not? In other words, you know, one of the things that always strikes me is that, in many places we have managed to get certain kinds of powers, certain organizations, certain institutions in place. But actually walking down the street has not changed in many places.

LEC: Okay, so part of this—this makes me think about this, Chandra. Part of this, right... what have we done with feminism as ideas, theorization, whatever?

CTM: Consciousness, literacy, what have we done?

LEC: ...in the academy that hasn't translated to those women? So you hear those women say—when I go to the Caribbean, when I am talking to those women, whenever any kind of research in the region—“Feminism? I don't know what that is, because those women up there,” and they're referring to women in the academy, “they have nothing to do with us. They don't know what I do.”

AM: Yeah, that true. It's a similar kind of disconnect, that whether you're talking about women getting into the parliaments, the obvious sides of power, or the academy. Now many of us chose the academy, absolutely because of its potential, its conscientization function. So we, those of us who remain radical in the academy, are using the classroom as the training ground that we would have liked in civil society. So I think we all understand the value of education, particularly in the South. So, there's that, but then, so I think we need to talk about the role of feminist intellectuals here and take it very seriously and look what happens to feminists who enter the academy. And in a sense there's no use blaming them. We're very quick to judge and say they sold out, but we need to re-analyze the structures of power that some of us are now inhabiting. And it's a serious job to try and create a radical space in those, and that's probably what I've spent most of my life doing. But as someone who has radical politics, you're right to question the academy. Why do I keep going back there? And I must ask this question, because the academy has become a fraught terrain and predominated by conservative forces and it is—

LEC: Absolutely.

CTM: And corporate production.

AM: Nowadays the corporations and the military are funding most of it. So we've entered a structure that's, in Africa, got worse. The failure of the initially nationalist and revolutionary ideas of what a university was for, has been supplanted by a much more neocolonial idea, it's become a bastion of conservatism. So radical thinkers have often been driven out. We've had to go and form other networks in civil society or try to form scholarly networks, which is what I was doing at the African Gender Institute for about a decade—working to put the politics back into gender, into both research and into activism and actually to bring those back together, so they can inform each other and we need to work across all sites. And the fact that we've got some of that I would say is an achievement. There are women in every sphere now who we can say are feminists. Linking them up, across disciplines, across institutional spaces and across borders is very, very challenging largely because of the resources. Look at these guys with their corporate jets. You know the resource issue is profoundly important.

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LEC: It's really really, something, because you know you see so much of that and I think that it speaks to how some of us have kept one foot in the academy and one in the community, because you don't want that split, because it really shows that you understand you want one to impact the other.

AM: And that's why we'd call ourselves feminist scholars, or feminist intellectuals because you're combining the politics with the sort of analytic capacities and things that it should be very useful to movements if we use those skills well and re-educate ourselves from what we've been taught in a radical way.

LEC: What do you see as one of the best ways across race, ethnicity, class divides as well as within and across national borders, right, especially in your case? To build solidarity in the current climate of neoliberalism and its impact on the global south.

AM: Some things have made it easier. Because what comes to mind immediately is the challenges, which you know, resources, doing the kind of conscientization that enables us to move forward to form that alternative culture and to form those different kind of relationships. I mean here I think we're talking about how we connect and the 80s was a period where identity politics surfaced, necessarily, because of racism, because of classism. I mean we needed to address some of these things across some of those divides. The one way I think we did get a lot of traction was in challenging the hegemonies of western feminism. Which actually is liberal feminism so it wasn't adequate to the tasks we had before us with decolonization and the need for social justice in places that had a history of gross racist injustice. So I think the south had a lot to do with that, from the times of structural adjustment. But then also that the connection we made with black diaspora communities. So look at the solidarity between black people here and black people in South Africa. I mean, we all were involved in some kind of anti-apartheid work and eventually I went to live there and work because it was one of those moments where it was possible for a lot to happen and a lot to be done. And even then there was this huge split, but because of the way in which women went into government, from the movement went into government and from the movement were in the academy—and I think in many African countries, the numbers of people is small, so individual feminists are circulating across those different terrains, so they're doing policy work, sometimes via consulting, they're doing NGO work, often on a voluntary basis and they're doing academic work. So you have some of those people, you know I'm thinking of a number of my close colleagues who traversed those terrains. People like Dzodzi Tsikata in Ghana, Techua Manu was an old hand...you know the names, there are so many of them that go right back to the 80s. And you know many of us worked in different spheres. People like Ayesha Iman who I also grew up with has been very important in moving women living under Muslim laws and I think those first South-South networks. I first think of AAWORD because I do think transnationalism was nothing new to us in the South. Firstly the colonial borders are artificial and they're very similar state structures so

there was always some, you know, cross-connection. And then the south-south networks were the new things that came up with the global recipes of structural adjustments of India, various African countries, various Latin American countries. Women, feminists from those came together in the DAWN network. And I think those mobilizations were very important to the real globalization of feminism; what we prefer to call transnationalization of feminism. Because before that, I think the Western so-called second wave moved in a number of directions. One of the key challenges in Africa I think is that the liberal feminism it's a different context because of nationalism and decolonization—but let's call it "entryism".

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The desire to get into the structures of power and do change from within was very, very prominent. I think now is the time we need to really revisit that because of the failures of many of our state structures who have not defended us against globalization or corporate interests. And that you know is the key role of the nation state.

CTM: And also, reproduced violent patriarchies.

AM: Wow, look at that. By the mid-70s, more than half of Africa was under military rule and I've always said military government is the most masculinist and it's all male government so whatever gains we were making with civilian rule, it was just wiped out every time you had a coup. Or they would do their own version of gender politricks, because they would direct women to mobilize on behalf of this dictator or that dictator. We saw a lot of that in Latin America. We saw a lot of it in different African countries, what we call "first ladyism", where she becomes the captain of all women. Those corrupt manifestations of gender politics, which back then people were quite naive about. We can't afford that.

LEC: All the political parties had a women's arm.

AM: That was just not radical, it was usually their women, usually through their relationship so these were, if you like, proxies for men. Some did creative things. I won't condemn all though, but their power was via men. That is not feminist. Easy come easy go.

CTM: Right, yeah, so radical. What does, you can even think about—can you think about examples of projects that you're familiar with, even now that you would call both radical and doing some urgent, necessary feminist work in the world?

AM: That's a tall—that's a very important question. It's a tall order, too—

CTM: Yeah, it is.

LEC: With the histories, I mean with the histories you've been talking about—

AM: So, I'm thinking about the histories and the experiences and the strategies that have been used so far and it's easy to see that they need to change because you know as we move forward you also become more and more aware of the constraints and the limitations. So, what is a radical perspective changes with each decade and possibly even faster now. So one of the key things is to actually bridge through time. There's been a lot of work thinking about bridging transnationally and intersectionally, both locally and transnationally. So I think nowadays what's so exciting about feminism is its postcolonial character, its strong critique of neocolonialism and the new imperialism. But a lot of that is about forming bonds across geographic and other kinds of borders. And today what I see, in women's movements, particularly in Africa, is an awareness of the importance of stitching back. Because there is quite a breach between generations and it's not just because there are older and younger people, it's also because, if you like, the escalation of neoliberal capitalism has speeded up. So it's no longer from parent to child, mother to daughter, mother to son. It seems like the urgency has escalated. So one of the things I like about the African women's movement is that a lot of the earlier organizations are putting a lot of energy into, call it movement building. But really it's about making sure that we transmit the experience and the consciousness and its limitations. They only see the limitations in how we failed. Because they weren't there and they can't see how much we've gained. So I think it's really, really important to hang on to history and the material reality. So, I always find myself coming back to historical and materialist analysis.

And I think moving to the US has actually made that all the more salient. It's really brought into focus because there is so much about identity, you know, particularly sexual identities.

CTM: And historical amnesia.

AM: Yes, and that's absolutely—here it seems to—certainly within the western academy, which is where I'm located, it's that concept that you borrowed from Foucault, “the threshold of disappearance”, so all the talk amongst students here is not about the next stage of radical feminism, it's about whether to be—well, the changing vocabulary, LGBT to queer to trans to...

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LEC: Pronouns.

AM: I have no—I mean these are really important issues. Issues of sexual freedom, of individual freedom, the freedom to express yourself and live how you want—it's not that it's not important. It's that it's displacing feminism, which above all, was a mobilization around women's shared interests. And the varied nature of those shared interests and dealing with it and coming together and founding political consciousness, which is not about where you come from or self, individual navel-gazing, you know I've got to find myself. I find that a very Californian, in particular [laughs] discourse, which you know it's fine for teenagers and adolescents but at some point you have to become political in the sense of looking across these silos of specific identities and situations and locations and from you know, those bridges. I mean I go back to *This Bridge Called My Back* a lot, but, you know, how do we bridge across different oppressions and work in synergy? And I think that's sort of one of the core challenges that you do see, again I say, particularly in the south, you see women's movements struggling with this and becoming more and more inclusive and no longer condemning what we used to call entryism or directed feminism, but rather working with those women and trying to re-radicalize them. I mean Isis-WICCE¹ is an organization—is an international network based in Uganda and they spent the first twenty years of their activism recovering women from remote war zones that would have been, you know, so horrendously abused, that they've more or less disappeared, both from their communities and to world history. So finding those women, bringing them together and basically rehabilitating them from multiple traumas and abuses. They've done that work which I would call the cleaning up work but now the discussions we have in that organization and others is okay, so how do we take it to the next level? How do we work across, you know, people in power, people not in power. Something that, I think the best example that I can think of on the spot is the example of the Women's National Coalition, which bridged and achieved a certain level of sensitivity in the new constitution and they worked across the parties, including women who'd, you know, been in the apartheid regime, including women from the ANC, women from unions, women farmer workers. Not all these women called themselves feminists but what they were able to develop is a shared agenda, around making sure and they succeeded to the extent that the South African constitution is probably the most advanced in the world at this point. And that was because of the way women mobilize. So, I think one thing which I'd like to do more of is and I think this project of yours is about, is you know, is actually pooling those knowledges and sharing them more effectively. And we've set up, I mean, certainly the *Journal of Feminist Africa* is about trying to cultivate that kind of consciousness and put it on record so people across, you know multiple decades and generations can see what African feminists are thinking and doing. But it's far from

¹ Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange

easy. Creating those spaces, that is exactly where no one wants to put their resources. So some of our best ideas and projects don't happen because no one will mobilize resources for them. I'm thinking of some of the anti-militarism work we wanted to do in Africa, drawing on the experience of people like Margo in Okinawa and those militarized sites as Africa becomes the major target for US militarism. We need to bring the women from Okinawa and South Korea to the continent to share. So we need much more of that. But that project wouldn't get funded. We spent five years trying to fund it because the idea was to build conscious and skilled women in the former conflict zones to do their own documentation, evidence gathering, in order to advocate better. No one would fund it. So you know, and then look what happened! If that kind of building and rebuilding had been done then, when disasters like Ebola hit in exactly those countries, at least there would have been more—

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CTM: An infrastructure and people who could have—.

AM: At least a people's infrastructure. Not to speak of rebuilding the public sector. I'm stopping myself from going back into the enormity of the challenges. So I think we need to create spaces where we can excavate what has worked. To keep the morale up and to keep the cutting edge on the big project, which is realizing the radical visions of feminism, which are about justice, about respect for people, for the planet. Actually it's about changing this sort of carnivorous, hyper-capitalist moment and transforming it. And even a more optimistic view, you'd say being ready and already beginning to address its imminent collapse. Because you can see the way this thing is breaking down. Look at the resurgence of killings of young black men. I mean if that isn't a pathological symptom of a dysfunctional system, if that is not a pathological symptom of a very grievously dysfunctional system, so many years after the end of slavery, after the end of apartheid. You know so these are signs that we need to mobilize more than ever, both to facilitate that process but also to be ready at the same time, to be building the alternatives. Alternatives—I think there are areas—when I think about alternatives I think there are areas where we haven't done nearly enough. I think about how uncreative we've been with regard to familial structures. Feminists either inhabit patriarchal families or they inhabit alternative as in lesbian or gay families, but they're trying to get married as well now, here. So, we haven't been creative in thinking about, say everyone has a problem with childcare. When we were raising children...if you were in Africa you might be able to still draw on an extended family, but for independently minded thinkers for the future we needed to be freeing up our time by socializing that so we didn't have to earn so much to pay for that, so that we could be spending some time doing more creative and more activist things.

CTM: Yeah, so perhaps some of what you're saying is really to envision you know, collective structures, that push back against the sort of individualist, competitive, you know, carnivorous values, that are very much a part of the time we live in.

LEC: Imagining, you know imagining that another world is out there without just looking to what's right there, you know. For example, challenging the hegemonic notion of family that now the gay-lesbian are trying to adopt that paradigm.

AM: They're mimicking it.

LEC: It's really problematic. When you look at the United States' structure, we can understand why some of that is. They will have absolutely no rights. No rights and no access legally, which is not the case in so many other countries. So you don't see in those other countries people rushing to marry because they have those alternatives and that they are acknowledged and recognized by the system. Here, they don't have. So there is no other way. So part of it, we have to understand as that, no?

AM: And some of those couples are transnational couples where marriage is about migration and the fact that capital can migrate but woe betide if you want to bring a partner. So people marry for that. Because I ask people why are you using the old paradigm of marriage and they'll usually say, well, if they were radical feminists they'll say, "Well it's not that we believe in the nuclear family. It's because we want to retire. We want our partner to be able to live with us and share health policy, health insurance." So it's very practical but that is exactly how we're reinserted. The second thing, speaking particularly as a feminist from Africa, I think we've put much of our energy into what some of us have called entryism. Getting into structures that have failed anyway, or are failing people anyway. So I think we need to be more creative on that. A similar thing, you don't just enter the patriarchal family structure and try to do it differently, because, believe you me, some of us have tried and somehow the institution has its own momentum. So we need to take institutions, from the families, through government structures and educational structures, you know all the way up, you know to global governance structures.

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There's been a lot going on. So in a sense no terrain is neglected. The plus side of that is that you could be active and activist wherever you are. And it's important that that happens so it's a radically different idea of activism, which isn't your old school mass movement. Yes, we need those, but I think we can disperse. And in a way maybe that's what feminism's contributed. It's a completely unconventional dispersal of change and it's happening all the time and there is all these dynamics of appropriation but nonetheless there is like a attrition... a attrition—I think of a micro sort of creeping attrition which is—no, attrition is a wrong word—.

CTM: A ripple effect.

AM: A ripple effect and changes that pass beneath the radar. Women are getting on with it. That's the optimistic view. Yes, changes—

CTM: And that is what keeps many of us going, no?

AM: Well, you know just think about relationships. We know each other, we can see, when you go into any of those movement spaces, the energy, the vision, all the things that, the thought, the creative thought. Things you might expect in the university.

LEC: It's not there, yeah.

AM: Students nowadays are all so stressed over their loans, their finances. One of the hardest things to do is to think freely in research universities. And I have found that amazing. So the institutions we thought to get into for good reason have themselves changed. And we have to rethink which spaces it's worth going into even though we have to continuously engage institutions.

LEC: And what the institutional agendas are and you know, what to do with your own agenda when it doesn't line up. Some of our graduate students are facing that dilemma right now. Can you do this as a thesis project when institutionally there are so many—

AM: That's why they need you in there. They need us in there because we're offering limited—because you know, we're few—but for the students we do take on and work with, we're in a sense almost their only option because we're spread way too thin.

LEC: And in this academy so much of it is, you know determined by the resources. Funding that they can and cannot get.

AM: Well, in Zimbabwe they set up the African Women's University and currently there is the—it's already started. We'll see how successful it is, but the Pan-African University, which is meant to exactly do differently than the neocolonial academy that after all, emerged out of Oxbridge and London University. So I think there are things where it might be worth intervening and participating.

CTM: And then there's a whole history I think of sort of autonomous universities. In various parts of Latin America and coming out of a sort of Freirean model of community education, which is about decolonizing knowledge. And in fact providing skills and knowledge that—I mean I see this as something we in the academy could really learn from, you know? But the conditions in the academy are so different that, to really learn from it you have to really do a thorough critique of the institution we happen to be in, otherwise—

LEC: Because they have had some serious struggles which they have managed to work against. You know they have kept the state out successfully and cases where they seem to have—like about to fall apart and they had offers of state funding and they refused, no? So that that work can continue. And that's what it'll take. But the kinds of comforts and resources that we have gotten used to is a real challenge.

CTM: Yeah, exactly.

AM: Well, I think you're doing it—so for example, at the African Gender Institute, which is a project that came out of continental consultations and workshops, we started with working on the curriculum in the institution, but the institution just after the end of apartheid was such historically white institution—was very difficult territory.

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With hindsight I think that the faculty was suffering from trauma. The loss of the world's biggest and most extreme affirmative action system ever, apartheid, left them terrified they were going to be pushed aside when majority of people had access. But because of the institutional constraint we did what you're now doing with the Democratizing Knowledge project, which is raise money from elsewhere to guarantee a level of autonomy and then do networks across campuses, in sort of outside any specific institution but creating those spaces where you could do curriculum work together and then go back to those multiple institutions and try and insinuate, it but we work together to build the intellectual capacity, the curriculum resources. At least that was the vision. The funding climate has made that kind of work harder and harder so we must find out the ways of doing it.

CTM: Right.

LEC: Which we're trying to do at Democratizing Knowledge.

AM: Yeah, I recognize it. So, you may not have an institution and we all know that one of the pains of the movement is the way in which people would spend twenty or thirty years building an organization and then one bad circumstance can take it down within weeks. So, I've kind of moved away from institution building to really working within networks because it's so hard for us to create institutions that we can all work together in and if we can't work collectively, whether it's in activism or in research, we can't build change. Our efforts are spotty and fragmented. So, we need structures. We need organizations.

LEC: Yeah, alternative structures. Because sustainability becomes an inherent problem if you're trying to work....

Feminist Freedom Warriors
*Linda E. Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in conversation with
Amina Mama*

AM: So if you decide you want to change the people and build the relations rather than build institutions which are inevitably forced to become hierarchical, because donors require it, or universities are still based on a chain of command, I mean to practice alternatives, we have to do it outside. In a way, in the interstices of those structures that we for one reason or another, still find useful to inhabit.

CTM: Right. That's good. That's a good place to stop, no? Yeah. Thanks, Amina.

AM: You're welcome. Thank you!

LEC: Thank you.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.