

African Women and Social Transformation: Exploring Wangari Maathai's Activism

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Abstract

This study explores the life and activism of Wangari Maathai and how it shaped social transformation and thus, it contributes to the knowledge base of African women's activism inspired by their lived experiences and efforts to create spaces that are politically, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Keywords: African women, social transformation, African development, activism

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed an expansion of African women activists whose efforts have made remarkable strides toward gender equality and participation in key political institutions. Women's activism has been inspired by the struggles of their predecessors such as Queen Nzinga, Queen Yaa Asantewa, Mbuya Nehanda, and Mekatilili wa Menza who had limited opportunities but did all they could to mobilize and challenge colonialism in Africa, and shaped a tradition of resisting gender oppression, political domination and exploitation (Beach, 1998; Beja, 2010; Berger, 2014; Lal, 2015; McFerson, 2005; Ulrich, 2007). Their victories and trials have inspired generations of women to organize social movements that promote human rights such as the one Wangari Maathai led.

The purpose of the study is to explore Maathai's life and activism that shaped social transformation. Her contributions are worth examining because she possessed unique qualities and faced numerous challenges. These influences illuminate why she was inspired to confront issues, how she strived to transcend confining barriers, and lessons we can glean from her philosophy and practice of activism. The study contributes to the knowledge base of African women's activism inspired by their lived experiences and efforts to create spaces that are politically, socially, economically accessible.

Conceptual Lenses

This study employs Africana womanism theory and critical pedagogy espoused by Paulo Freire as the primary lenses. These theoretical perspectives can shed light on how the process of thinking about liberation translates into activism. Africana womanism is a theoretical concept that helps to interpret experiences of women of African heritage in the context of a collective African centered worldview and struggle (Hudson-Weems, 1993; Mazama 2003). Clenora Hudson-Weems who coined the term in the 1980s, explains that the theory embraces ethnicity, gender and personal and collective identities. Although it prioritizes women's empowerment, it rests on the belief that problems such as sexism, classism and racism have to be solved holistically and collectively within communities in alliance with males in the struggle. The Africana woman develops a close relationship with family, community and career even in the midst of oppression and human suffering. Africana womanism is a suitable lens for interpreting Maathai's individual and community empowerment and her holistic approach to solutions about human problems.

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is one of the most important educators and humanitarians of the 20th century. As a proponent of critical pedagogy, his approach to education was both revolutionary and political, linking the identification of issues to positive action for change and development. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) is devoted to discussing his perspective on critical pedagogy.

Freire's critical pedagogy involves posing and solving problems in ways that challenge the recognition, engagement and critique of any undemocratic, oppressive and unfair social and institutional practices (Freire, 2005). It has a service-learning component that situates activities that are relevant to learners' experiences and combines learning goals and community service in ways that can enhance growth for educators and learners and the common good. The passion and principle infused in these goals help learners develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, and connect knowledge and truth to power, as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy. Several tactics in Maathai's activism are mirrored in Freire's critical pedagogy. Both prioritize the mastery of knowledge and skills for energizing positive change and underscore the need to create democratic spaces so that resources that are vital for human survival are equitably distributed. African womanism and Freire's critical pedagogy are suitable for evaluating the transformative power of knowledge and skills for the individual and community manifested through their commitment to awaken their consciousness about issues related to gender, socioeconomic and political oppression and work in solidarity to seek solutions.

This study engages carefully selected primary and secondary sources that underline Maathai's philosophy, ideals and practical inclinations. The primary sources that focus on the interaction of Maathai's life story with the environment, race, gender, democracy and class differentiation include *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) (Henceforth *Unbowed*) and *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the approach and the experience* (1985). Other sources comprise a documentary, namely *Taking Root* (2008), articles, interviews, speeches and selected books that give recognition to Maathai's activism such as Ulrich's *Well-behaved Women Seldom Make History* and *Speaking of Earth: Environmental Speeches that Moved the World* (Tal, 2006). The latter is an edited collection of twenty speeches from twelve countries of notable activists' contribution to the environment delivered from 1963 to 2004. Following a close reading of these sources, Maathai's life, activism and impact are described and analyzed.

Key Issues, Strategies Accomplishments and Impact

Wangari Maathai started from humble beginnings, drew inspiration from her experiences, overcame many obstacles, fought to gain opportunities and became a globally renowned activist. An examination of the primary and secondary sources indicates that Maathai's activism is layered to include quest for personal change, concerns with discriminatory work place policy and conservation of the environment, empowering women and ordinary people to challenge inequality and oppression, global campaigns comprising fighting for debt forgiveness for Third World countries and fighting for human rights. Central to Maathai's activism are social issues involving a woman's place in society and what sacrifices she must make to find personal fulfillment.

Defining and Transforming Self

Self-definition and transformation are vital for empowerment because of the influences of sociocultural, patriarchal and postcolonial ideologies on the social construction of womanhood and the attitudes to gender and power relations. Maathai's journey toward self-definition and personal change are captured in *Unbowed* (2006). Ebila (2015) states, "...her autobiography becomes a powerful tool for self-identification that recounts her personal experiences and offers lessons to readers about the importance of being in control." (pp. 148-149). This memoir raises a number of questions including what it means for a highly educated female activist to make history. She was born in 1940 at Ithithe, a rural community located at the foothills of Aberdare mountain ranges that scientifically influenced rainfall patterns that fed several streams, created lush green fertile land and produced enough food crops. She reflects on how European settlers were drawn to the highlands' fertile land, natural resources and perfect weather. She asserts that there was a connection between the racist colonial regime and environmental destruction such as clear-cutting of native forests, hunting of wildlife and undertaking expensive commercial agriculture all of which facilitated their capitalist enterprises.

Growing up in a complex society characterized by emergent multiple hierarchies based on race, gender, level of education and socioeconomic status, the oppressive tendencies of African culture and colonial era crystallized in her mind the need to battle deep-seated perceptions of African women and men (Ebila, 2015). Due to colonial influence and Christian missionary activities, society and cultures were going through transformation. African people were forced to become squatters and laborers on British settlers' farms receiving only substandard accommodation and food but no schools. The emerging lifestyles forced women to head many households and men to migrate to urban areas for work only able to make interval visits to families.

Maathai credits her experiences locally and abroad for shaping her evolving perspectives and equipping her with knowledge and skills that enhanced the connection between searching for identity and acquiring consciousness about social responsibility. Although her formal education was delayed, partly because sons were given first priority, and due to the high cost of education and the expectation of girls to fulfill domestic chores, Maathai's enthusiasm for education led her to study in the United States (US), as a beneficiary of the Kennedy Airlift Program that offered scholarships to promising African students in 1960 (Maathai, 2006; Samuel, 2006). Following her four-year immersion in Mount St. Scholastica College for women in Atchison, Kansas, she earned a master's degree in biology from University of Pittsburgh in 1965. Her doctoral studies in Germany and Kenya earned her a PhD in 1971, making her the first woman to earn a doctorate in Eastern Africa.

While the view that highly educated women were less African was pervasive in society at the time, a solid educational background shaped Maathai's self-discovery and became a crucial foundation for her transformation and activism (Ebila, 2015; Maathai, 2006). According to Maathai (2006), her experiences in the US inspired her quest for personal change that entailed reclaiming her indigenous African names, "Wangari Muta" and dropping her European names, "Mary Josephine;" it exposed her to activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson and awakened her consciousness about issues women faced in Kenya. She states:

United States prepared me to be confident not only in reclaiming my original names but to critique what was happening at home, including what women were experiencing. My years in the United States overlapped with the beginnings of the women's movement and even though many women were bound to traditional ideas about themselves at that time, I came to see that as an African woman I was perhaps... more constrained in what I could do or think, or ... hope for. This was to come into sharper perspective when I returned to Kenya in 1966, thinking that the sky was the limit for me. (p. 96)

Name changing was a trend among activists of the 1960s both in Kenya and in the US that aligned with an African-centered worldview and signified new beginnings. Combined with critical introspection, building networks and, revising her views, and tactics, her reclaimed identity allowed her to affirm who she was in relation to her heritage and community. While receiving the Elizabeth Blackwell Award, dedicated to women who have broken through stereotypes and used their talents to improve the human condition, Maathai stated, "You don't truly know yourself until you become involved in serving others" (Unikel & Williams, 2008, p. 3). Her empowerment emerges from a deeper understanding of herself and what she stands for.

Striving for Workplace Transformation

Workplace issues provided an opportunity for Maathai to exercise her social responsibility. Upon returning to Kenya from the US, she faced a system that marginalized educated women and adopted corrupt hiring practices and ethnic bias (Maathai, 2006). While employed to teach Anatomy at the University of Nairobi, Maathai raised awareness about the university's discriminatory policy. She challenged institutionalized discrimination of women that was normalized at the university even with a small number of women staff. Married women were denied benefits such as housing, health insurance and pensions because their husbands got them elsewhere even when their male colleagues were guaranteed these benefits. Maathai (2006) states, "Because of that type of discrimination, junior male staff took home more than we did, despite our senior academic positions" (p. 115). Having identified the problem, Maathai and her colleague and friend, Veristine Mbaya ventured to wage a battle for equality and equal pay for benefits that was met with opposition from several fronts by university officials and some women.

As practical strategist in the women's rights movement, Maathai (2006) highlights some of the strategies they utilized. They met university officials and demanded an explanation for gender discrimination but received an outrageous response. Maathai and Mbaya tried to engage university authorities through their positions as elected officials of university Academic Staff Association but it was not within the association's legal status. Then they tried to turn the association into a union through the courts to negotiate for the benefits but had the case dismissed, because the chancellor of the university was also the president of the country. As the fight for equal benefits proceeded, Maathai and Mbaya urged women not to sign discriminatory terms of service. While some women and men did not support the campaign for equal benefits, a number of male colleagues felt they needed a staff union.

Since there is no indication that the agitation for equal benefits contributed to a pertinent legislation, its effectiveness cannot be overstated. Maathai (2006) notes that because the university wanted to "maintain peace," it gave Maathai and Mbaya a reasonable financial compensation that enabled Maathai and her husband, Mwangi to buy a house for their family. Although it is unclear if they continued to petition for other women employees to receive their benefits, this partial victory inspired her to become a mobilizer for causes she believed were for the common good. Also, it planted a seed for prospective workplace activism. Maathai's efforts propelled her to higher ranks becoming the first woman at the University of Nairobi to become chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy in 1976 and an associate professor in 1977. Also, she was active in the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), an organization comprising elite women in 1976-87 and was its chairperson in 1981-87. In order to empower local women for economic gains, Maathai started organizing with elite university women and soon invited local women to join the group. This effort culminated in the founding of the Green Belt Movement.

Activism through the Green Belt Movement

Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it (Maathai, 2006, p. 138.)

When the Green Belt Movement (GBM) started in 1977 the link between environmental conservation and peace was still largely unclear. It was dedicated to combating deforestation in Kenya and subsequently became a platform for empowerment of women and the community through civic education and environmental stewardship. Maathai's environmental activism channeled through GBM has had a far-reaching impact and visibility after her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

It is featured in several outlets such as an official website, books, journal articles, interviews, speeches, films and videos. Information on the GBM's website indicates that the guiding principles and core values are love for the environment, gratitude and respect for earth's resources, self-empowerment and self-betterment and the spirit of service and volunteerism.

A growing indication that devastating effects of a looming desertification and deforestation in Kenya was diminishing forest cover and natural water supplies, reducing indigenous food staples with the potential to cause hunger and poverty, shaped GBM's goals and operational framework (Maathai, 2003; Michaelson, 1994; Tal, 2006; Ulrich, 2007). Maathai (2003) details the GBM operational framework guided by long-term goals that broadly cover protection and improvement of the environment and empowering community with culturally relevant skills, employment opportunities and positive self-image. Michaelson (1994) states, "These goals illustrate an exclusive focus on direct social and economic transformation, and express no overt political agenda. GBM has thus been able to promote transformational and even somewhat revolutionary goals without repression because it presents no direct threat to decision-making elite" (p. 549). Its operational framework blended complimentary efforts to actively engage members to acquire theoretical knowledge that inform responsible practical application from planning, management and consumption via flexible and decentralized activities provided by grassroots members and field workers, and formal centralized responsibilities performed by paid office employees (Maathai, 2006; Michaelson, 1994).

Maathai's resourcefulness was sharpened intellectually through joining organizations, attending conferences and meetings such as those organized by United Nations Environmental Program. As an educator, she believed that knowledge is power and is acquired for human sake thus, shared it with her mentees of all walks of life including those who had been marginalized because of their gender and lower social status to develop agency for creating change and ensuring that obscure lives are recorded (Maathai, 2006; Presby, 2013; Tal, 2006; Ulrich, 2007). Ulrich (2007) states, "... she knows that a movement is more likely to survive if its participants take responsibility for preserving history" (p. 186). Maathai's advocacy for tree planting was a very practical form of ecological empowerment for women.

Kenyan women have been instrumental in the entire food chain along with their male relatives serving their families and community. Maathai's efforts, as an environmentalist prioritized people and their quality of life guided by the awareness that justice is worked out in the open public spaces, in the concrete struggles of human beings constructing and contesting various potential changes they envision. Reflecting on the GBM's emergence and growth Maathai (2006) states, "it seems no coincidence that it was nurtured during the time the global women's movement was taking off or that it flourished during the decade for women 1976-1985..." (p. 125). According to the GBM's website, Maathai (2006) and Ulrich (2007), it was while Maathai served in the NCWK, that she introduced the idea of planting trees in 1976 to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women to promote food security and the quality of human lives.

Like other critical thinkers and practical people around the world, Maathai re-evaluated a symbiotic relationship between the environment, plants, animals and people that is intertwined with a spiritual dimension. Maathai (2006) states, “The Green Belt Movement had provided a laboratory of sorts to experiment with a holistic approach to development that dealt with problems on the ground but also examined... their ...systematic causes” (p. 255). The first tree seedlings planted in her back yard birthed GBM then it gained a wider support, as it developed into a broad-based, grassroots organization.

A number of Maathai’s approaches to service learning and civic education reflect Freire’s (2005) pedagogic principles of social justice. They range from hands-on tree planting activities, inviting foresters to give talks, visiting forests with protesters, to underground activities and lobbying for international pressure. Her approach integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities to think about how they can utilize knowledge to transform society. (Kushner, 2009; Tal, 2006).

Maathai emphasized social literacy that encourages learners/citizens’ ownership, viewed democracy as a dynamic ongoing project and required participation and creative input from all. In recognition of the value of local knowledge, Maathai empowered some of the women with very little formal education, in a statement assuring them that they had the skills to plant trees since they were already familiar with planting their staples she noted, “I don’t think you need a diploma to plant a trees...Use your woman sense,” (Maathai, 2006, p. 136). The women learned from one another, assessed their work and became instrumental in reducing soil erosion, harvesting rainwater, providing food and fuel and expanding the movement. In order to facilitate progress, compensation was offered for successful implementation of a ten-step procedure by GBM that involved forming a group of tree planters, locating a site for a nursery, reporting the growth progress and ensuring that the seedlings survived (Maathai, 2006). Maathai’s high level of education did not affect her relationship with the women that were considered less educated (Ebila, 2015). According to Maathai (2006), rural women freely shared their experiences in the local languages and with the assistance of translators. Also, GBM became inclusive drawing men into the movement and attracting a broad base of support.

Her memoir *Unbowed* (2006) documents that Maathai invested eighteen hours a day in the mid-1980s to the GBM, in addition to teaching at the university and raising her children. She raised awareness about the GBM through speaking about its progress at conferences and taking delegates from various countries to visit green belts and developed international networks that benefited GBM. For instance, Terry Williams, a delegate at one of the conferences returned to Utah where she publicized GBM through her writings, established a GBM that collected funds for Maathai’s group and mobilized a group in Utah to plant trees.

Other international links such as Norwegian Agency for International Development, Danish Voluntary Fund, African Development Foundation and the United Nation's Development Fund for Women provided funding that boosted GBM's activities and helped to cushion the movement from government repression (Maathai, 2006; Michaelson, 1994).

The GBM made a substantial impact locally and globally most of which were highlighted in Maathai's Nobel Lecture delivered in 2004. Because Maathai believed that people were great resource, she recruited, inspired and engaged a wide network of support of ordinary people, church leaders, diplomats of foreign embassies and acquaintances worldwide to grapple with the complexities of challenging a rigid system and shaping society through participatory activities. The GBM's official website documents that the movement currently has 3000 nurseries and offering 3000 part-time jobs while 30,000 women have learned skills like forestry, bee keeping and food processing. These marketable skills bring much-needed money and food to their households (Scott, 2013). The movement has attracted several local and international speaking engagements focusing on the environment and numerous awards and grants (Maathai 2006; Michaelson, 1994). Other intrinsic benefits can be gleaned from a number of videos and speeches attesting to the role GBM played in empowering women who were previously overshadowed to foster personal efficacy and social agency and boost self-confidence needed to challenge silence, gender inequality, and ignorance and to tackle broader national challenges for development (Michaelson, 1994; Unikel & Williams, 2008). The GBM spurred efforts toward democratization in Kenya.

Promoting Democracy in Kenya and Africa

Wangari Maathai along with many other African activists have paid dearly for their work to broaden democracy in Africa and in turn faced intimidation, violence, arrests, and even risked death. As Kenya struggled in the post-colonial years, Maathai sought to bring true democracy through her activism that underscored the connection of empowerment to teamwork and political action (Presby, 2013). Her political views, agency and challenges are expressed in her speeches and books including *Unbowed* (2006), *The Challenge for Africa*, (2009) and *Bottlenecks for Development* (1995). At the core Maathai's political philosophy is the belief that good governance is essential for supporting and sustaining environmental conservation.

The visibility GBM created facilitated Maathai's entry into formal politics and in turn she increased the political visibility of women and ordinary folk. Maathai's political endeavors were seeded in part when she joined the NCWK, an organization devoted to improving the status and involvement of women in politics. She was elected vice chair of NCWK in 1979 and voted as chairperson from 1980 to 1987 (Maathai, 2006). While serving the organization, she recalls that her path and that of the government crossed "...repeatedly ...with far more explosive consequences" (Maathai, 2006, p. 159).

Although initially the GBM's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space (Maathai, 2004; Maathai & Goodman, 2005). In this regard, Maathai channeled her critiques into political opposition through grassroots organizing for a democratic society and awakening consciousness in favor of environmental politics and the needs of those who depend on it for sustenance. Thus, Maathai's political exposure touched various areas. For example, she chaired various organizations that had political dimensions, campaigned for her husband when he vied for a political office, opposed the building of a proposed six storied complex in a public park, supported mothers of political prisoners, participated in the opposition party activities and run for political office. Guided by the belief that issues must be tackled in a holistic manner, Maathai viewed her role in politics as an integral part of her activism.

While women who engaged in postcolonial formal politics individually and collectively became silenced and vulnerable to attacks from government machineries, they also showed resilience (Ebila, 2015; Maathai, 2006). Maathai was a strong supporter of and campaigner for her husband, Mwangi, when he vied for a seat in Parliament in 1969 and 1974 (Maathai, 2006). As a politician's wife, and an educated woman, she found herself constantly in the public realm and under the scrutiny of his supporters who thought her high level of education had watered down the kind of hospitality they would expect from a "good African woman" (Ebila, 2015; Maathai, 2006). This experience exemplifies Maathai's family-centered character and ability to grasp opportunities that can expand her influence. By her own admission, campaigning with her husband and speaking to the public shaped her approach to politics. Her unsuccessful run for parliament in 1977 did not dim her dreams for political office.

When Maathai led a protest against the government's proposed *Times* Complex at Uhuru Park in 1989, she argued that it posed adverse environmental consequences, infringed on the ordinary citizens' free park space and was a costly proposal. The battles Maathai waged against the building of the six-storied complex are detailed in *Unbowed*. She notes, "My work to protect Uhuru Park had raised my profile as an advocate not only for the environment but also for human rights" (Maathai, 2006, p. 208).

Drawing from her experiences with non-coercive approaches to activism, Maathai wrote letters to various people in positions of power including the managing director of the *Kenya Times* inquiring about the proposed construction, filed law suits with the High Court, appealed to Nairobi residents to speak out, and penned grievances to the minister and the press about concerns for building a complex in a public park (Maathai 2006; Michaelson, 1994). Other recipients of her letters included the office of the president, director of the National museum of Kenya, Executive director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO) and the ministry of public works.

However, there was a backlash from the male-dominated members of parliament and President Daniel Moi who proclaimed that she had bugs in her head (Ebila, 2015; Maathai, 2006; Melton & Dater, 2008). She faced challenges initiated by the government's response to her concerns. Her letters were ignored, she endured verbal abuse, vilification, false accusations for inciting the people against the government, defamation in the local press and denigration of GBM all of which she responded to stoically: "...I wasn't going to take those slanders lying down. As I read the newspaper headlines---'MPs Condemn Prof Maathai', and 'Prof Maathai Under Fire in Parliament'—I knew that this was just what I needed to stake my ground." (Maathai, 2006, p. 191). Maathai maintained that the proposed building was not a symbol of progress but of destruction.

Media coverage of letters supporting her cause combined with her resilience, continued to fuel her uphill battle against government officials. Additionally, she appealed to different organizations, lobbying internationally for support from environmental groups and donors. "Eventually, the donor community pressured the Kenyan government into shelving the project. Maathai's long and lonely crusade had finally ended in victory" (Michealson, 1994, p. 553). Maathai, then issued a statement to thank the president "for abiding by the rule of law and allowing free speech to air the differences over the *Times* tower complex." (Maathai, 2006, p. 198). Nonetheless, a vicious backlash followed her victory targeting the GBM as well. The eviction of the GBM from a government-owned office forced her to use her own house as an office for seven years and the registrar general ordered GBM to provide audited accounts for the previous five years. For Maathai, these harassments were the government's attempts to axe the GBM whose continued survival she attributed mainly to the international links she had maintained.

In the 1990s the political climate was changing with the emergence of campaigns for multiparty democracy. As a prodemocracy activist, Maathai was invited to join Forum for the Restoration for Democracy (FORD) party, founded in 1991 led by Oginga Odinga, a long time opposition politician (Maathai, 2006). When FORD fragmented, Middle Ground Group was formed and chaired by Maathai with the aim of uniting opposition parties. She applied a variety of strategies to raise awareness about the need for unity during elections using banners, prayers and teach-ins. She states, "I drew on my American experience of the teach-ins of the 1960s" (Maathai, 2006 p. 231). Although their criticism of Moi's government eventually culminated in his legalizing other political parties and agreeing to hold multiparty elections, rallies initiated by members of the opposition were confronted with arrests.

In 1992 Maathai and other people were attending a press conference to expose the rumors about an impending military coup and a list of potential targets for assassination including Maathai. Meetings were suppressed in various ways. First "robbers" broke into her house, then the police arrested and charged her with an alleged serious crime that warranted a death penalty. She states, "...it was a dark time.

I was in jail again, confined to a holding cell at Lang'ata police station.” (Maathai, 2006, p. 213). Support for her release poured from women’s organizations, the international community including eight US senators. Samuel (2006) included an article in *Blue Gold & Black*, published by University of Pittsburg featuring those who knew Maathai such as her former advisor, Professor Charles Ralph who recalled seeing the news about Maathai’s arrest on television and realized that besides being a modest traditional graduate student, she was also “...a radical, very activist person” (p. 72.)

Protests led by mothers of political prisoners fighting for justice in 1992 made history during President Moi’s regime. In order to help bolster their determination and exemplify true sisterhood, Maathai joined about ten women protesting against the government’s detention of their sons (Maathai, 2000; 2006). Together they occupied “Freedom Corner” in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park, demanding the release of 52 alleged political detainees (Maathai, 2006; Michaelson, 1994). These women expanded the boundaries of motherhood to the public realm where they staged social and political activism in opposition to state sanctioned repression.

Tactics used in the protest included space occupying (sit-ins), hunger strike, and praying, singing freedom songs, sleeping out in the open and carrying signs. According to Maathai (2006), they had many supporters and allies. An Indian man gave them a tent; others donated money, water and glucose. Reverend Peter Njenga allowed them to use the church premises, while prominent political figures, religious leaders in the country joined them. On the fourth day when armed police arrived to evict the women, Maathai was beaten, injured and became unconscious and was hospitalized. The mothers stripped off their clothes in protest and defiance and continued with the protests at the Freedom Corner till early 1993 when the government agreed to release 52 out of 53 prisoners. Although this effort reveals Maathai’s flexibility and commitment to justice, fighting to reform criminal justice system was not a major emphasis of her activism.

Maathai blurred the lines between environment, women and human rights and still managed to place women at the center of her and their activism. One of the events that brought her to the global limelight was speaking during the 4th United Nations Conference (UN) on Women in Oslo, Norway themed Global Forum on Freedom of Expression in June 1-6, 2009. In a speech titled “Bottlenecks to Development in Africa,” she spoke forcefully about the positive role of GBM in empowering women and improving the quality of life of people in Kenya and elsewhere in the African continent. Since Maathai believed that issues needed to be discussed critically and holistically, the last half of the speech highlighted fourteen obstacles related to political, economic, cultural issues including corruption peace and security, political and economic leadership, democratic process, international debt, flawed international market, poverty, population pressure, illiteracy, foreign languages and, destruction of traditional heritage.

Maathai's entry into formal politics was marked by some measures of success and challenges. She viewed her achievements in GBM as a legitimate springboard for this step and a reflection of what she could do in politics. In Maathai (2006) she documents her unsuccessful attempt to run for a by-election for a seat in parliament in 1982 (there were only two elected women). Her candidacy was disqualified partly because of confusion and suppression. She lost her university job at a time when her long and draining divorce process weighed heavily on her emotions, as she struggled to nurture her children. She states, "Throughout this difficult time, my children were the reason I got up in the morning and continued working.... They kept me focused" (Maathai, 2006, p. 151). She kept her role as chair of NCWK, even though forceful repression was chipping away at GBM.

Getting involved in pacifying the volatile ethnic clashes of the early 1990s was another tragic event in Kenya's history that became an extension of Maathai's activism. *Unbowed* (2006) documents that the conflicts were instigated partly by politics and environmental devastations and the affected regions were linked to a second green belt that GBM established in 1977. When the community sought help from Maathai, she visited the affected sites and was able to witness evidence of violence, arson and fatalities. A delegation of diplomats and the press and government officials joined her later.

A number of actions Maathai initiated included organizing victims of violence and appealing to them not to retaliate and helped to resettle them and organize unifying sports activities. Additionally, she met with the elders, held seminars at a church and helped to provide farms to keep them busy and planted trees to foster peace. Due to backlash, it became increasingly dangerous to visit displaced victims of ethnic violence. Dr. Makanga, a close ally was abducted, while Maathai received death threats. She gained support from a network of concerned informants, journalists, international media and diplomats including the Norwegian government which was a strong supporter of human rights and funder of GBM. When necessary she went underground, hiding in safe houses, disguised herself and traveled incognito, often riding in a different car every twenty miles. Although the clashes died down, she states that the victims of conflict had "been turned into internally displaced refugees" (Maathai, 2006, p. 249). This problem intensified her commitment to issues of land and democracy.

Maathai was determined to raise her activism to another level. In *Unbowed* (2006) she recounts that she joined the race as a presidential candidate in 1997. This was the first time women ran for the presidency in Kenya. As one of only two women contenders Maathai lost partly due to lack of funding, disunited opposition and damaging perceptions by her opponents. She continued to unify the people to defeat the controlling party, *Kenya African National Union* in democratic elections by holding several meetings to discuss the future of Kenyan politics that were frequently disrupted by a heavy police presence. Using her slogan, "Rise Up and Walk" she finally succeeded, with her National Rainbow Coalition of a number of opposition political parties.

She won elections by ninety eight percent of the votes under President, Mwai Kibaki whose government appointed her to serve as the minister of Environment and Natural Resources in January 2003. This was a major break-through for her and supporters. Her jubilation is captured in the statement, “We made change in Kenya. We brought back democracy!” (Maathai, 2006, p. 287). Maathai is one of the few women in Kenya who has served as a cabinet minister. With nineteen percent representation of women in parliament in 2010, Kenya has tried to expand political spaces for women but still falls short of the constitutional requirement of two-thirds (Onyinge, Murekio, Murugi & Mburia, 2015). Maathai is a role model who challenged seemingly impermeable barriers awakening in other women the desire for self-assertion.

Global Activist

Struggling to effect change globally, Maathai addressed human rights, environmental issues, freedom of speech and global economic issues (Maathai, 2006; Melton, & Dater, 2008; Michaelson, 1994; Schnall, 2008; Scott, 2013). For example, fighting for debt forgiveness for Kenya and other Third World countries had been her focus for 25 years (Maathai, 2006; Maathai & Goodman, 2005). She states, “Poverty was not only the result of bad governance and environmental mismanagement, but also an outcome of the global economic system...The call for rich countries to cancel the debts owed to them by poor countries became a global campaign” (Maathai 2006, p. 277). She co-chaired the Jubilee 2000 campaign to promote debt forgiveness. Working with groups such as the GBM, Kenya Debt Relief, Kenya Human Rights Commission and church bodies, she set out to gather one million signatures to petition world’s wealthy countries to cancel Third World debts in 2000. Although the groups held peaceful marches, they faced a backlash and intensified repression from the government that broke the marches using clubs, tear gas and arrested some of the nearly sixty protesters including nuns and priests. Maathai who was not among those arrested kept vigil outside the cell in solidarity. She stated, “Throughout the long night, we sang and prayed and kept our spirits up” (Maathai, 2006, p. 279). Officials of the Jubilee 2000 network were contacted to fax letters of protest to the Kenyan government and World Bank representatives pressed for their release. Despite the large network of activists and speeches Maathai delivered, debt has remained a big problem for African countries.

Wangari Maathai is internationally recognized for her persistent struggle for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. Green Belt Movement’s website documents that between 2004 and 2009 following her winning of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, Maathai was invited to attend several global conferences that brightened her global presence in Norway, Copenhagen, Denmark, Nairobi, Kenya, Congo, Japan, South Korea, Howard University in DC, Beijing, China, to name some. These engagements expanded her activism to issues related to freedom of speech, AIDS epidemic, human rights and challenges women face and agroforestry.

Other prominent roles that placed her in the global limelight include her service as board member in the Environmental Liaison Centre and role in the commission for Global Governance. *The Challenge for Africa* (2010) details her role as goodwill ambassador for an initiative to protect the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem. She addressed the UN on several occasions and spoke at sessions of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the earth summit. According to the GBM website, the award-winning film, *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*, is being re-released by Vermont's Marlboro Productions in twelve languages: Arabic, Bangla, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Hindi, Indonesian, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. This has the potential to broaden the exposure to Maathai's role and legacy.

Conclusion

Maathai emerged from a notable history of activism straddling struggles for independence from colonial rule, national development and fight for democracy. She merged her rhetoric about holistic view of rights with challenging sexism, environmental degradation, political oppression and capitalist exploitation. The recurrent message in her activism is the urgency for protecting the environment in order to fight food insecurity, reduce conflicts that arise when resources are not equitably distributed and to make the planet safer for the present and future generations. As a dynamic organizer, she motivated groups to take initiatives to solve problems, become empowered and live active and rewarding lives. Her efforts in one project seemed to morph into another with varied levels of success and challenges, as she strived to expand democracy in Kenya, Africa and campaigned for universal concerns for the environment and human rights. She exemplifies that activism is not a one-woman show but a viable network of those committed to fighting for human rights without being afraid to push for gradual and radical transformations. The current activities of the Wangari Maathai Institute and the Green Belt Movement are dedicated to continue her legacy.

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