

Badri, Balghis and Aili Mari Tripp (eds), *Women's Activism in Africa*. London: Zed Books 2017, 250pp.

Activism in its varying forms is a tool of our time. Often it may manifest as a political or cultural strategy working towards consolidating people power and holding institutions, leaders and organisations accountable and responsible. Authored by a range of activists from across the African continent, *Women's Activism in Africa* animates the struggle and achievements of African women who have shifted the agenda from looking at women simply as victims to shaping "global understandings of women's rights and feminism" (p 1f). In taking ownership of their activism, many of these women have reintroduced debates on ethics and ethical values and standards that society and people in their communities hold dear. This has been crucial to the development of women's activism in Africa because the constraints and existing suppressive systems that existed in the colonial period and which manifested in the initial decades after independence "tied" many of the women's organisations to "the patronage politics of the single-party state" (p 3). This changed as women came together in different forums, "redefining feminism in African terms" and organising themselves around a plurality of views (p 5). This shift in thinking included "new ways of imagining women" (p 6), challenging the hegemonic manoeuvres of Western women who were vying for control of agendas that had no relevance to the African women activists (p 8) and rejecting the "perceived condescending and patronising attitudes of Western scholars" (p 9). In this regard the opening chapter of the book sets the tone for a new narrative, an assertive claiming of the innovation, progress and development of women's activism in Africa. Each chapter incorporates significant examples of real efforts, so that from Tunisia to Tanzania and from Ghana to South Africa one gets an astute sense of the "solidarity among the diverse groups" as well as the challenges that many women faced, specifically the intergenerational gap and the divisiveness it produced (p 34).

As the women activists dealt with shifting mind-sets and new contexts post-independence, they began to leverage power and sought innovative ways to occupy spaces in the political, social, cultural and economic realm (pp 35, 51, 81, 103 and 125). Thus, from being an integral component of the fight for independence in Tanganyika in 1961 (p 156), in continuing "the struggle against patriarchy and male dominance" in Sierra Leone (p 44), from enduring violence and imprisonment as political prisoners in Tunisia (p 75) and in shaping the landscape for

women's political leadership in Africa (p 196), African women activists have been channelling their priorities and urgent needs as identified by them towards the formulation and inception of policies and changes at different levels to achieve the types of engagements that were needed — not assumed. Each chapter presents different historical referents for the women's activism and highlights different strategies and outcomes. During times of economic crisis in Kenya, women formed "self-help" groups and organised around different needs. The "*ngwatio*" consisted of women who assisted each other with physical labour in their farming activities, the "*mwilaso*" were groups who worked on a rotational basis and the "*vuli*" involved the formation of a "new capital asset" when the task was too big to handle (p 186). On the issue of women's rights in South Africa, the launch of the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in 1992 which eventually reached more than two million women included the setting up of a team to monitor the constitutional talks happening in the country during 1994. A significant victory for the WNC included the removal of a clause that affected the equality for women if it allowed for the exclusion of customary law from the ambit of the law in the Bill of Rights (p 212). In Sudan, the Islamist women's group championed the attempt to criminalise female genital mutilation (FGM) in the National Child Act (2010) whilst women activists mobilised across "ideological divides" to demand of the state to institute the 25 per cent women's quota in the election laws, thereby increasing women's access to political representation (p 152).

What is most striking about the anecdotes and lived experiences of the women in each chapter are the sense of confidence, hands on application of new contexts and challenges and a sense of the determination that they exhibited in spite of exaggerated difficulties. Throughout the pages there is a deep understanding of the commitment to give meaning to their engagements but more poignantly, there is this assertion of "their own narrative", of a questioning about who speaks for whom and who is silenced. These women occupy the spaces wherein different power structures operate, structures that centre equity and justice and it is also here that women activists in Africa are asserting their ideas. In pushing for women's rights and equality, female activists have not hesitated to use different technological innovations, to the extent that the virtual activism of women in the 20 February movement forced a national dialogue on "political and socioeconomic issues in contemporary Morocco" (p 108).

Ultimately, this is a narration of struggle, of change, of mutation and of innovation. Although there can be a sense of "I know this, now

let's move on" in relation to some of the very comprehensive sketches and data around the activism, overall each chapter builds on the conceptualisation of women's activism in Africa as more than a narrative of victims. These are women who speak from within, women who have raised the power of the collective and they are women, like Zainub Bangura (p 229) who is committed to peace and prosperity for all Africans. It brings forth the resilience, clarity, organisation and intelligence of these women. It showcases their determination, their astute understandings of their needs and challenges and it forces the reader to recognise that there still are immense constraints on women that marginalise them from economic and political institutions. But the ability to be innovative in thought and action, the deftness with which new generation female activists engage with the social media and a growing sense of international solidarity all signifies hope. Hope for a positive change. This is a very inspiring and necessary read at a time when women's voices are regularly muffled.

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Berwouts, Kris, *Congo's Violent Peace, Conflict and Struggle Since the Great African War*. London: Zed Books 2017, xxi and 193pp.

Kris Berwouts is a seasoned observer and independent analyst of the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), especially with respect to the ongoing crisis in the east of the country, having worked full-time on Central Africa for almost 20 years. He started off in the non-governmental organisation (NGO)-world and later partnered with different international actors in the DRC such as the Department for International Development (DfID), the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the European Union (EU). He has written extensively on the Great Lakes Region and, in this latest publication looks at the situation, again, from a different angle. Its 167 pages are packed with facts and figures, information and analysis while several detailed maps guide the reader through the intricate world of the Great Lakes Region. It is well-written, logical and coherent, and easy to read. One immediately feels that Berwouts has absorbed the subject he writes about.