

MAKE PLAIN THE VISION:

AFRICAN WOMEN IMPACT THE FUTURE

by

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Who knows how the world will be in 2020! But one thing is clear: if we are still around, all of us gathered here today and beyond, will be people, not only of the last century, but the last millennium. A unique privilege that only chosen people could have ever experienced! We were created by God, and born to our parents to play this transitional role. Therefore, although we cannot guess what the world to come will be, we have the mission to invent one as we would like it to be. And using our present knowledge, we will pass today's talents to the future unknown.

I was born a woman, a black woman, an African woman. Three identities received from heaven, so that I could, at this transitional moment, share the story and be one of the foundation stones that will make the future. So, here I am, at one of the last assemblies of the 20th century with 12 000 women from the East, the West, the North and the South. We are gathering here, determined to use ordinary lives of the women of the world to create a great future. I thank the organizers of this Assembly for the extreme honor to let me address you.

The 20th century started with great hopes:

- the hope that the development of technology would eliminate hunger and major diseases from the surface of the earth.
- the hope that a sustainable social cohesion would prevail after colonialism and two world wars, and that conflict mediation and negotiation would replace the dreadful sound of guns.

Unfortunately, only 20 months before its end, 1.5 billion people are still going hungry in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, including the USA. Only 20 months before its end the institutional leadership built through the establishment of the United Nations system in 1945 is being destroyed under our very eyes.

Only 20 months before its end, the entire world is invaded by emerging diseases deriving from the many aggressions against our environment, our immune system and our souls.

Women of various African countries stood with their people every step of the way and more so now, at this tail end of the century, when economic globalization and structural adjustment programmes have destroyed the catalytic role of the State. Indeed 90% of the food, 80% of water, 80% of services offered by the informal economy, including clothes-making, health care and even shelter still come from African women. These women have become so fundamental in the lives of their people, that the importance usually accorded to founding figures who create institutions, or start unprecedented actions have been melted with the ordinary. The sense of greatness that their actions deserve has disappeared in the daily routine. In an effort to break that cycle and highlight this special form of leadership, the only image that came through my mind, is that African women occupy the first place “after God” in the daily lives of their people.

Beyond food, shelter, health care, and clothing, beyond the direct involvement with their immediate families, traditional sub-Saharan African women are consulted behind closed doors for marriage counselling, land disputes and even war matters. During colonialism, the struggle for political independence and the recent intra-state wars, which have afflicted the continent since 1970, and caused 10 million deaths and 5 million refugees, African women stood by their people, sometimes directly leading struggles as the following examples show:

- In Ghana: A woman called Yaa Asantewa, born at the tail end of the last century, the only woman who appears on the banknotes of the country, led a resistance of rural women against the British envoy who came to take away the golden stool representing the seat of power of the Ashanti Empire. The dignity

and self-worth of the Empire was at stake. More than anybody else, Yaa Asantewa and her group knew that losing this symbol of wealth and power would be devastating for the Ashanti morale and pride. It would destroy the economic development of the group and transform proud people to a band of losers. So, with no fear of death, they entered a “man’s domain” and won.

- In Cameroon: At the end of the 50s, during the struggle for political independence, innocent children were killed, men were mentally and physically destroyed, villages burnt or abandoned, and women asked to either turn against their children and husbands, or die. As a form of resistance, Basaa women of Southern Cameroon made a song that was sung all over the land. It said: “Kamerun i mpot le nkana a yé le Roland a huak,” which means “Cameroon says that the governor called Roland should leave.”

This song became a rallying song for all. It was disarming for colonial soldiers holding guns against innocent people. It had a psychological effect, which was part of the package that led Cameroon to independence in January 1960.

- In Uganda: After the fall of Idi Amin, the Honorable Betty Bigombe, Minister for Pacification of the North and North-East of Uganda, led several silent demonstrations of women wearing belts called “langoya.” Traditionally these belts are used to curse the fighters. Those silent demonstrations caused many fighters afraid to be cursed to deposit their arms and come out of the bush. The silent marches of Ugandan women wearing langoya brought back peace in the region.
- In Guinea: In 1975, during the reign of Sekou Touré, the economic crisis led to abuses by the army and the police against small informal businesses mostly owned by women. Exasperated by these humiliations, women of Guinea,

wearing red turbans symbolizing blood, silently marched to the presidential palace and demanded justice and dignity in the market place. This unprecedented revolt from women, led to major changes in the economic politics of Guinea.

- Finally, just before the Beijing Conference in 1995, taking into account the Burundi/Rwanda massacres and with the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), African women launched the "Peace Torch." This torch, launched in South Africa in the presence of President Mandela, travelled to all the war zones in Eastern and Central Africa before leaving for Beijing from Ethiopia, the seat of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). After Beijing, it travelled to West Africa and will shortly be travelling back to Asia through Japan.
- The Plea for Peace which goes with the torch reads as follows:

A Plea for Peace

"We, the women of Africa, are hurting.
 For thousands, nay, millions of years
 We have been mothering this Continent.
 We have carried and delivered life,
 We have nursed it to maturity--
 Loving, caring, nursing, teaching.

Through slavery, colonial rule, the struggles for independence,
 We have protected the young and nursed the old.
 We have participated in resistance to conquest
 And outside domination.

We have watched the plunder of the resources of our land,
And we have nursed the wounds.
We continue to toil daily at home,
In the farms, markets, factories, offices.

And now, these genocidal wars, wars
That destroy what we have so painstakingly constructed.
The wars have ravaged our children, our bodies, our fragile lands.
The wars have robbed us of our dignity and self-worth,
They have disinherited our children from their land and rendered us wanderers,
Subjected to hostility, shame, destitution.
They have killed and maimed, decimated our children
And desecrated our shrines.
Worse, they have bloodied our hands,
Made us commit atrocities,
The shame of which we shall never recover.”

Even with these kinds of achievements which went out of women’s usual domain, African women’s leadership went uncelebrated. Rather, the 20th century kept projecting them as objects of pain and misery in need of assistance, as if each time the world wasn’t watching! **By urging us to tell the story of ordinary women, this Assembly will be reported as one that unveiled the extraordinary actions and exceptional leadership of the underdogs of the 20th Century: the African women.**

Therefore, as I close my eyes to dream and visualize the future, I want to travel with this heritage of mine, ensuring that the global world internalizes at least two of the most visible manifestations of African women’s leadership:

- The first one is the silent leadership

The many reports published in the course of the 20th Century presented African women as silent, almost passive, vague, slow and confused. The root causes of the above described attitudes were generally their illiteracy and the absence of modern education. As usual, the camera pointed only to their weaknesses, forgetting to show their strengths. Although I am an advocate for basic and high education for girls and women, I believe that the next millennium which is characterized by speed, noise and globalization, will reach new heights and insights by internalizing the silent leadership. For it is clear that if you want to understand, you need to listen, you need to remain silent. If you want to accommodate, you need sometimes to be passive, and for a peaceful interaction with the rest of the world, there is a need to accept to be tentative before the end of negotiation.

There is a saying in my language that the falling tree makes more noise than the growing forest. The noisy 20th Century did not notice the strength of this growing silent leadership. Let us ensure that this talent is handed over to future generations.

- The second manifestation is the community-oriented leadership

By nature, interdependency in relationship and connectedness constitute a healthy development for a woman. Which, in other words, means that women, conceptually and practically see things and situations beyond themselves. This pattern has been strongly internalized by African women. For example, on the banner of “Ntôn Bôda,” the Presbyterian Women’s Association of Cameroon, you can read these words:

“Ñem wem wa ba mbôô
 Lee ndi ndap yem ya bai mapupi
 Iti Ntôn Kristô Ngui
 Lee ndi loñ yès Kamerun ya ba
 Ngui i kété Nkoñ Africa
 Nkôôbaga i hôla disi dipe.”

Meaning:

My heart will be at peace
 So that my home will shine
 To strengthen Christ church
 Making our Country Cameroon strong
 Within Africa
 Ready to help other lands.

I once asked my mother how rural women of Africa could assist their sisters from developed countries? Without any hesitation she said: because we are children of God, we connect and work beyond the visible. After recently reading James Redfield’s “The Celestine Prophecy,” I could, more than before, understand how profound my mother’s answer was. Yes, we can affect each other randomly because we have one cosmic mind.

Two projects illustrate this community-oriented leadership:

The village of Akwapuem in Ghana created a rural bank in the late 80s. The strongest economic group behind the project was informal-sector women involved in buying and selling food products. The money individually borrowed from the rural bank would allow each woman to

rent part or a whole truck to take her to and from other villages where she could buy food. For a minimum of two weeks a woman trader would leave her children for business. The negative impact of the constant absence of mothers, and the growing burden of the cost of individual truck rentals led the Akwapuem rural bank to develop a new strategy that linked the development of the bank to the development of the entire community. Soon many trucks were bought and run by the rural bank, creating new jobs for the community, thus allowing women traders to limit their absence to two days. The village school started training young workers for the rural bank needs including the local language, so that all transactions could be led in the language spoken (mastered) by rural women and traders. This initiative has transformed the whole community.

Likewise, in the case of GICPAB, Cameroon, rural women growing cassava decided to work together as an organized group called "Yum." This group enables each women farmer to have six other women helping her to plant, weed and harvest her crops. Through this process the productivity rose and these women farmers sold the surplus and used the money to enhance life in the community, including: the creation of a school, with a balanced meal each day for the 200 children, a library with a reading book for each child, a pharmaceutical box, where basic medicine is bought wholesale and retailed to villagers in small quantities. You can read about the experience of this group in the book entitled "Fighting Hunger With Cassava." Here too, the experience has been transformative.

In both cases, rural exodus has been curbed; school results have risen and local health and energy improved. But most of all, these communities have developed self-confidence based on the certainty that, yes, they can transform their lives themselves.

In meeting community needs in food, shelter, transportation, health, money and environment restoration, African women show a new form of work which can result in providing more jobs and keeping more money in the community. They also draw attention on new forms of interaction that help promote local languages and knowledge, and community connections that allow people to learn from each other and appreciate each other in a way that is impossible in the global economy. These community-rooted initiatives that transform problems and dependencies in local jobs and capital formation could create community-friendly cities that work to secure self-reliance goals rather than entice outside investors to weaken them.

But all these community-related actions may become vulnerable if the evaluation of work and performance continue to be based on individual criteria. The leadership provided by African women should generate new commitments to our communities:

- The commitment to invest in the growth and development of our communities so that no one goes to bed hungry.
- The commitment to leave each community greener than we found it.
- The commitment to educate and protect children of our communities.

It is a curse to be sorry for someone, or to believe that they may not do well. As real transmitters of life and energy we must believe in the work African women are doing and strengthen what they have started. We must also allow future generations to benefit from their wisdom. Let them be among the teachers of tomorrow. Let each one teach one for a more balanced future.

The right to dream should be added to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If not, life itself may come to an end.

Thank you.

United Methodist Women

1998 Assembly

Make Plain the Vision

Convention Center
Orlando, Florida
May 14-17, 1998
