

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S AND GENDER ACTIVISM
AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: TANZANIA

**Transcript of Maimuna Kanyamala
Interviewer: Anneth E. Meena**

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Maimuna Kanyamala was born in 1956, and is an activist, entrepreneur and feminist who has actively campaigned for women's rights in Tanzania for the past 20 years. She has translated her feminist activism to the grassroots level and brought issues to the national level policy platform. In 1999 she was one of the co-founders and the first Executive Director of Kivulini Women's Rights Organizations. The organization (Kivulini) seeks to address the root causes of domestic violence by working closely with community members and leaders to change attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate violence against women. In 2011 she was awarded 'Tanzania Women of Courage' by the US Embassy Tanzania in recognition of her efforts in challenging gender-based violence and promoting women's rights in Tanzania. Scaling up her efforts on women rights, she has partnered with national and international feminist groups in Canada and Ireland to build global solidarity on shared issues of violence against women, HIV/AIDS and poverty. In 2012 she stepped down from her leadership role in Kivulini and devoted her time to founding MikonoYetu. She serves in the UN Women Southern Africa Regional Office as a think tank member in the Ending Violence against Women and Girls group. She is currently working to develop a comprehensive history of African women throughout time and ultimately establish a women's history museum in Mwanza, Tanzania

Anneth E. Meena was born in Coast Region in 1971, and is an activist, researcher and feminist. She is an independent consultant in Environment, Health and gender issues. She is passionate about women rights. She has worked in several organizations holding various positions e.g. Monitoring and Evaluation coordinator for World Vision, Arusha (2000); and Project Coordinator for Forum for African Women Educationalist on Centre of Excellence school in Tanzania as a model for gender responsive curriculum and pedagogy (2001 -2002). She pioneered the establishment of a family social enterprise and became the first school manager and later first principal (2007- 2017). She has worked as an Independent consultant with various Women Rights Organizations including TGNP Mtandao; Women Fund Tanzania Trust (WFT-T); Readership for Learning and Development (Soma). Meena has been involved in documenting women stories through TGNP Mtandao, WFT-T, Soma and currently with University of Michigan. She is a member of various coalitions including sextortion, women leadership and constitution.

Meena has had various academic awards such as 'The Hammad Prize Award' in recognition of exceptional written work on an international topic, 2005 from Wagner School of Public Services, New York University, New York, USA. She was one of the two recipients of an Oprah Winfrey Scholarship as a graduate at the New York University (2004 to 2005). She was a Ford Foundation Fellow (2003) with International Centre for Research on Women Washington, DC, USA. In 1999 she received small grant Research Award from Council for the Development of Social Science Research.

She holds an undergraduate degree in Environmental and Geographical Sciences from University of Cape Town, South Africa (1996); Masters of Demography from University of

Dar es salaam, Tanzania (2000) and a Masters in Science in Management for Public Services from the New York University, USA (2005).

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Anneth E. Meena: Okay. Thank you, Mama Maimuna, for accepting to be part of the Global Feminist Project that is sponsored by the University of Michigan. The goal of this project is actually to undertake the oral histories to create and preserve the conversations with women whose scholarship and activism has contributed to women’s activism or has contributed in a critical way to issues that are important to women. So without wasting much of our time, we are going to spend an hour today discussing about five broad topics, including general background about your life and work, your reflection on your work, your thoughts about the relationship between feminist scholarship and activism, and how you see your work in relation to these practices. Your thoughts and insights about your work in the context of broadly-conceived notion of women's movement. And finally, the connections you see, if any, between your work and those of activists in other national settings. So if we start with the background about your life, as you think about where you are today, how would you depict the journey that has brought you to this point?

Maimuna Kanyamala: Thank you, Anneth, for having me [unclear section], and I’m glad to also contribute to the global initiative. And let me go straight, in terms of background about myself, and the way that I’ve had this journey since I started. Briefly what I want to say is my journey was rough, in a way, particularly I started. But I would like to start with the organization that I started-- I joined --in 1994, that was Kuleana Centre for Children’s Rights.¹ The place that I was living had so much violence against women and children. And myself and the other women--I mobilized the other women to start speaking openly, because it wasn’t spoken openly in terms of violence happening in our community. And because we were living here in Mwanza² in a hill, and it was a hill that we could see young girls marching from the top to the bottom. And these are girls who had been circumcised [not clear] and the pain. They are proud of themselves, but the violence against women was also very rampant, and that steered my intention to start advocating for women’s rights and girl’s rights. But the organization that I was working was specifically working, advocating for the rights of children, particularly those in the streets and the other things among children.

¹ The Kuleana Centre for Children's Rights is a non-governmental organization focused on advocating for girls’ rights, as well as providing basic services and education to street children in Tanzania. (“Kuleana Centre for Children’s Rights.” Source. <https://asksource.info/organisations/kuleana-centre-childrens-rights>. Accessed 3 December 2021.)

² Located in northwestern Tanzania, Mwanza is the country’s second largest city and serves as the capital of the Mwanza Region, one of its 31 administrative regions. (“Mwanza.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mwanza>. Accessed 14 December 2021.)

So I started with my colleagues in 1999, we started Mikonoye – sorry, sorry, we started Kivulini,³ Kivulini was specifically working to advocate for women’s rights with special focus on mobilizing communities to prevent domestic violence. When I was at Kivulini I faced so many challenges. That’s why I’m saying, it wasn’t a rough ride, it was tough, because when we started Kivulini, the first incident that emerged was a young woman who was battered and slashed her ears, who came to us dripping with blood. So we organized ourselves very quickly, urgently, to send the girl, this young woman, for medical because she needed a PF3⁴ and she also said she wanted to be interviewed by TV, so that at home they would see her with no ears. Of course, whenever we intervene, we always speak and explain what that would mean, but she insisted that she wants to be seen by many in the community. So we arranged and we got a lot of support; from the media, she was interviewed, and then the police also helped, the court also helped. And the girl, the husband, was sentenced to jail for life. Unfortunately, due to bad conditions in the prisons, he died, and that didn’t bring-- it brought a lot of finger-pointing, a lot of you know, people saying that we started Kivulini because we wanted to send men/husbands to jail. It was talked all over. I’m a Muslim, it was spoken in the Mosque,⁵ and one of among the board members, she came and told me it was spoken in the mosque, and they were accusing us of dismantling, you know, the families. But we insisted that it was the law, and we didn’t want to confront, but we said we need to continue advocating for women’s rights and also inform the community what would be measures if they violently abused women. So my essential commitment in my life is to advocate for women’s rights and particularly, at that particular time, but now it’s urgent to continue, that I will continue advocating against violence against women.. Because it doesn’t only affect women themselves, it affects the children, the family, and the entire community, and the entire community, also the entire nation.

There is so many researches conducted that how much impact it has within the family and also within the national. So my central commitment in life is to empower women so that they can also advocate for their own rights. When I talk about women, it’s women and girls, because, for me, I believe that empowerment can transform how women are perceived and take part in terms of doing something, but this has to continue. So empowerment transforming the voices where women were silent but women can speak openly about their rights and take action to prevent it. When I speak about empowerment, I’m so, I’m so

³ “Kivulini” refers to the Kivulini Women’s Rights Association, established in 1999 with the goal of nurturing supportive, violence-free communities for women in Tanzania and especially preventing gender-based domestic violence. (“Kivulini Women’s Rights Association.” Wikigender. <https://www.wikigender.org/wiki/kivulini-womens-rights-association/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.)

⁴ The Tanzania Police Medical Examination form, or PF3, is a health assessment form required to be filled by victims of assault prior to going to a hospital. (Jumanne, Saumu. “PF3 forms should be at hospitals to save lives.” The Citizen. <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/oped/pf3-forms-should-be-at-hospitals-to-save-lives-2547322>. Accessed 3 December 2021.)

⁵ A mosque is a Muslim place of worship that follows the Islamic rules of prayer. (“Mosque.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque>. Accessed 7 December 2021.)

proud that during my time at Kivulini, we had so many women coming up, speaking openly. And also, we had kind of a movement what was termed We Can, so not only were women were organized to advocate for their rights but we also had men who said no to violence, and they said we can take action against violence. So see women themselves stand and speaking openly and challenging violence that's happening. But also seeing men connecting, because from the start as I said, men thought we were against men, and we want them to go to prison. But later, they realized that these women are their aunts, you know, their mothers, their daughters, so because in Kivulini we also had a legal aid so they started coming to assist their daughters, their mothers, their aunts, their whatever. So they realized, in reality what we were advocating for, that was a very big achievement to see women are standing up, to see men are joining against violence. This will be more sustainable for the community, because for us as an organization we come and go. But they are there within the community to continue. So maybe I end up there, in case there is anything else?

AM: I think you have traveled the background of your life. If I got you correctly I think Kivulini was like the highlight of your journey? Yes?

MK: Yes!

AM: So, we go to the second one. Background about your work, what drew you to the work you do or the work that you have done?

MK: I guess I may have mentioned it before.

AM: Exactly, yes!

MK: But let me explain that, because I also, I see what is happening, so being in the community and seeing what is happening, that has initiated my effort to say that I will not stay mum, I will have to take action. Because action always [not clear]. So by saying no to silence, I started breaking the silence because no one was talking openly, so I spoke openly, and I received a lot of challenges but it builds strong muscles to continue..

AM: Okay! Thank you. Reflection on your work: how do you...I'm not sure how to rephrase this. How do you understand the term "feminism" maybe in relation to your work?

[connection interrupted]

MK: For me I will take a very simple understanding of feminism because there are times when you speak about feminism people may see it as a challenge. For me, feminism is about equality between the two sexes, which is very much important to me, because I am looking in terms of inequalities that exist in our community. I would like to change that, to ensure that men and women are on equal footing, so to me, feminism is about equality among the two sexes. But looking that women have been, women have been put down or have been suppressed, [unclear] we want to ensure that they also own--rent, or they own land or they own properties. So to me, to bridge that gap of inequalities. So what it mean to me, for now, as I said previously, I was working with Kivulini, but also I learned so much while working. Majority of women-- because we were working at the grassroots⁶ level-- majority of women who were dependent faced more challenges in terms of relationships, but women who were a bit economically powerful--they had options. And we had projects that targeted that, and even research also contributes that women who are economically powerful, they have options. We are not saying that they are not facing violence, but they can step out of violence if they want. But when I was at Kivulini, when you speak of women stepping out of violence, majority of them could not because they were so dependent, I don't have a fare to go home, or my home is in a lot of poverty, or I'm an orphan. But looking to myself, when I am economically powerful, I can do whatever I want. I can buy properties, I can step out of violent situations, I can own anything that I want because I'm economically powerful. But, that does not deny that women who are economically powerful are not facing, and that is why for me, I also stepped – it's also from my own experience, and also from research, that has demonstrated that women who are economically powerful have options. So currently, I'm working around economically empowering women and girls. Have I covered?

AM: Yes, it's well covered. If we go to the next one, it's about the relationship between feminism scholarship and activism: how do you perceive the relationship between scholarship and activism in general and in your work?

MK: How do you perceive! For me, I feel we need to join hands, I would say. For me, because, when you talk about scholarship, it is almost like academia; while activism is what we are doing, what we are doing at the community level or at the grassroots level. There is so much going on at the academia levels in terms of research, in terms of studies, in terms of global thinking, how that could be done differently. So we need to be interlinked, we need to bring that kind of sisterhood. I'm saying this because I had already done with a

⁶ The concept of "grassroots" refers to a type of activist organization managed mainly by citizens, as opposed to governments or big corporations. To encourage social change, they tackle causes through a community-based approach. (Bettencourt, Alexandra. "Grassroots organizations are just as important as seed money for innovation." UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/grassroots-organizations-are-just-as-important-as-seed-money-for-innovation/>. Accessed 7 December 2021.)

number of international organization. We need to bring that kind of solidarity in general, so it can also trickle down to the community level. Because when we talk about academia, if they don't have connection with the activism at the community level, maybe, you know, pushing things at UN level. For example, you can even talk about what Beijing platform⁷-- that kind of activism, that is high, that kind of academic level, but when we identify issues that can be addressed at community level, we are the implementers, but we need to all the time connect, because things are also changing.

Let me say, for example, when we talk about the violence that is happening at the home, because now it is violence in the media, violence in the internet, so violence is expanding. But if you just put your head like an ostrich, then in the community, you may end up losing other things that are happening. So we need to be interconnected really, to bring what is going on at the global level, and see how that can also be implemented at the grassroots level. So for me when I talk about feminist scholarship it is more academic; activism is what we are doing at the community level.

AM: Okay, thank you. The intersection of your work with the women's movement in the country and globally. So what is your analysis into it? In terms of the expectations of the development of feminism in this country, what is the relationship -

MK: Let me start with the first one.

MK: Okay so for me, let me start the analysis, the evaluation, and expectations of feminism movement in my country. For me, there is so much going on in our country in terms of feminism and the movement, and this-- it can start to feel, though, like we had the constitution, a kind of national movement here to push issues regarding women equality in our constitution, and that was headed by women from Tanzania with the other organizations. The movements are also spearheading by Tanzania Gender Networking Program,⁸ and this is of course with the other organizations. And this was during the Kilimanjaro;⁹ we had a Kilimanjaro kind of demands, that women were mobilized from the

⁷ The Beijing Platform for Action was a resolution declared by the United Nations after the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in September 1995. It is recognized as a progressive framework for change and advance of women's rights and seeks to promote a set of principles related to gender equality. ("The Beijing Platform for Women Turns 20." UN Women. <https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about>. Accessed 8 December 2021.)

⁸ Established in 1993, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) is an activist organization focused on promoting gender equality, social justice, and women's empowerment in Tanzania through multiple strategies. ("Tanzania Gender Networking Programme Factsheet." <https://www.womenforwater.org/tgnp-factsheet.html>. Accessed 8 December 2021.)

⁹ Mount Kilimanjaro is the highest mountain in Africa and is known for being a difficult hiking and climbing destination. In this context, the speaker is likely referring to a period of extremely difficult or daunting

grassroots level and particularly from rural areas who were the most affected, and it brought a lot of women engagement, and also set up our own demands, which are continuing. We have so many other political, economical, social movements, and I feel that we are going on the right direction.

Although now we are slowed by COVID-19, there is so much slowness, because our movements are mobilized on women, who have to meet. So now majority of women in rural areas we may not be able to meet as we used to, and rural women, they can't depend so much on ICT,¹⁰ they are left out. So you know that, I don't know whether, that vubuvubwe, that vubuvubwe we have seen from the rural perspective is slowing down because how do we communicate during Covid19. But we were going in the right direction. Not only the movement of feminism, but different type of intervention in our community.

My organization has relationships with other organizations. These are like Women Fund,¹¹ Tanzania Gender Networking Program, and many other organizations, women's organization, the Maasai¹² Women Organizations.¹³ Particularly demanding for the rights of women and girls. And we participate, change, we participate at the community level. Broadly, I would say our participation and relation, relationship with women's movement was going well. As I said this was, I mentioned about in our country, but we had movements that we joined in Ireland, and also in Canada. In Ireland, we had women, women's organization joined together by Benelux at that time, and we had so many interventions. That they would come here and they would mobilize women we would sit together and discuss what issues were pertinent in terms of our own context, and we would provide that kind of support to each another. Because there are times that, our issues might not be in the priority, but we had issues about poverty, we had issues about violence, we had issues about HIV/AIDs.

demands. ("Mount Kilimanjaro." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Kilimanjaro. Accessed 20 June 2024.)

¹⁰ "ICT" refers to Tanzania's Information and Communication Technologies Commission, responsible for the delivery of technology-related services to citizens, as well as the development of a successful infrastructure for the area of telecommunications. (The United Republic of Tanzania, Ministry of Works, Transport and Communication. "National Information and Communications Technology Policy 2016." <https://www.ictc.go.tz/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/4-policies?download=48:107>. Accessed 8 December 2021.)

¹¹ The Women Fund Tanzania was created in 2007 as the first women's rights fund in the country with the goal of providing financial support to feminist initiatives through the distribution of grants and other resources. (A glimpse of WFT's Her-story." Women Fund Tanzania. <https://wft.or.tz/who-we-are/our-history/>. Accessed 10 December 2021.)

¹² The Maasai are an ethnic group that inhabits parts of Kenya and northern Tanzania, known for their culture and unique clothing, as well as their connection to nature and natural parks. ("The Maasai Tribe, East Africa." Siyabona Africa. <https://www.siyabona.com/maasai-tribe-east-africa.html>. Accessed 13 December 2021.)

¹³ The Maasai Women Development Organization (MWEDO) was founded in 2000 with the goal of supporting marginalized Maasai women and helping them to become socially and economically independent. ("About MWEDO." MWEDO. <https://maasaiwomentanzania.com/about-mwedo/>. Accessed 13 December 2021.)

But also, in Canada, we had our colleagues from University of Western Ontario, particularly in the Department of Women's Studies to whom we worked very much close, to the extent of them coming here, because we all thought [unclear]--we changed the narrative to say that we needed to speak about women who have been very powerful in this – we were aiming at Africa - but it's something that I learned when I was in Ireland. So they came here, we visited so many museums, and then we saw how women were not portrayed in the museum. They would be mentioned because of, you know, these are the utensils that women had, or these are special kanga¹⁴ that women wore, but there was nothing intensive about women. This is very true, even today, if you have written about women We had very strong women in our country like Bibi Titi,¹⁵ Sophia,¹⁶ and others, but you don't see them written. Like during the Maji Maji rebellion,¹⁷ we had a woman, we had queens here in nani, in Tanzania, who fought for this country, even here in Mwanza we had a queen who is named Queen Nkwimba,¹⁸ and they fought. We had many queens who were heading, but they are not written in the history so that even our children could continue learning, and girls they could start believing in themselves that they are not, they are not weak, they have been very strong. So that's what we have been doing with the Canada Women's Studies department. To bring out stories of powerful women so that they can be documented and read. Because what is happening now, we just hear that women have been very weak and we ourselves we have internalized the oppression and we believe that we are weak. But

¹⁴ A kanga is a piece of colorful cotton fabric used as a garment predominantly by women in Africa. ("Kanga (garment)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanga_\(garment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanga_(garment)). Accessed 14 December 2021.)

¹⁵ Bibi Titi Mohamed was a Tanzanian politician that advocated for increased women's participation in Tanganyika's fight for independence. The sovereign state of Tanganyika later merged with the territory of Zanzibar to form what is currently known as Tanzania. ("Bibi Titi Mohamed: Tanzania's 'Mother of The Nation.'" Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/en/bibi-titi-mohamed-tanzanias-mother-of-the-nation/a-52448380>. Accessed 14 December 2021.)

¹⁶ She is most likely referring to Sofia Kawawa, who founded the Tanzania Women's Union (UWT) alongside Bibi Titi. Kawawa was also involved in Tanganyika's struggle for independence and became a member of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party. ("Sofia Kawawa." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sofia_Kawawa. Accessed 14 December 2021.)

¹⁷ The Maji Maji rebellion was an African uprising against Germany during the "scramble for Africa" phase of the colonial period and lasted from 1905 to 1907. Its name comes from the belief that *maji*, a medicine developed by the prophet Kinjikitile, had the power to turn German bullets to water, which was ultimately proven to be unsuccessful. ("The Maji Maji Rebellion." Emory ScholarBlogs. <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/violenceinafrica/sample-page/the-maji-maji-rebellion-2/>. Accessed 14 December 2021.)

¹⁸ As suggested by Kanyamala, it is hard to find any records of Queen Nkwimba. However, one document published by the Boston University African Studies Center refers to Nkwimba as the mother of the early rulers of the land of Bukwimba, which is now presumably the territory of Tanzania. (J. M. Kadaso Mange, et al. "African Historical Studies, Mfumo Ya Bukwimba: The Origin of Bukwimba." Boston University African Studies Center. <https://doi.org/10.2307/216272>. Accessed 14 December 2021.)

Nyerere¹⁹ said, “women, you are eagles, you are not chicken, straighten up your wings and fly”.

AM: Wow!

MK: So the narrative, we changed a little bit to bring up those strong women so that people would see we were not weak because we were able to internalize the oppression. We are being taught that we are weak, but we can be very strong and continue. Are you hearing me?

AM: Yes, I am, I'm getting you very clear. I'm just thinking to the second question it's like you have answered it already. Connection to international forms of activism and scholarship. Do you have any connection with activist? So that you have answered, which was the last question to our session. I just want to thank you for your time, Mama Maimuna.

MK: Can I say something?

AM: Yes

MK: I Just want to mention one last thing, Anneth, which I feel is drawing us back. As I said previously, when we speak about feminism, there are people who are not understanding, and that's why sometimes it's easier to speak about equality. So let me tell you something.

AM: Okay.

MK: There are issues about feminism that is-- I don't know whether it's pulling us back, because for me, as I said it previously, it's equality between the two sexes. But when it comes now we are advocating for other issues out of women's issues, that's where feminism is being misunderstood. I don't know whether you underst—if you have captured me on that.

AM: Issues like what? When we say, “issues outside women's issues,” what do you mean? Who do you mean?

¹⁹ Julius Kambarage Nyerere was a politician and activist who served as the first Prime Minister of Tanganyika after its independence in 1961 and later as President of Tanzania until 1985. (“Julius Nyerere.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Nyerere. Accessed 15 December 2021.)

MK: For example, when you talk about issues about the gays. People--they don't relate to feminism as equality, but they feel as feminism we want to advocate for other issues beyond what we feel are important for women.

AM: Okay. Yeah. Okay, anything else you want to chip in before we round up?

MK: Anneth, me I'm very happy that I'm contacted, and let's see how things are going, because this again is about feminism--scholarship, feminism, and activism. Even this act alone is feminism scholar - --

AM: Scholarship.

MK: Scholarship, it's scholars and academics, and we, so even what I believe that our views could be taken seriously because with our colleagues at scholarship level. So when you translate if there is anything that you feel I haven't accomplished in responding, please do not hesitate to contact me.