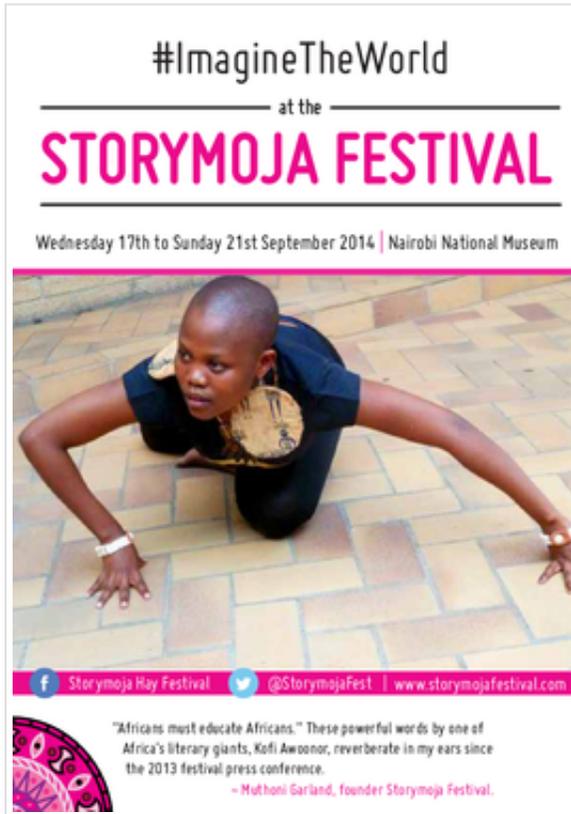


Storymoja: The gender stories (or lack thereof)

22/09/2014

[6 Comments](#)



Kudos to the organizers of the just concluded Storymoja festival for keeping arts practitioners and art lovers engaged for five glorious days! It was an intellectual and artistic feast, and many of us were spoiled for choice on which session to attend.

The festival also gave me the opportunity to reflect about how gender interacts with our Kenyan identity and social consciousness.

On Sunday, the last day, there was a session entitled “The future of men” which promised to be a session to discuss the changing role and expectations of men. Frankly, I thought that it would be a time to hear men being honest with each other, and I naively hoped that we would finally get some conversation about overthrowing the current situation in which the dominant model of Kenyan manhood is politicized noise, corruption and exploitation of the Kenyan people through stealing from public coffers and turning us against each other in the name of tribe. Or hear about how many men are schizophrenic, having a mistress for the hanky panky, a wife for meeting the parents and bearing the kids,

and an office fling for intellectual and professional engagement, as if human beings' sexuality, social roles, work and mental activities are disconnected from each other.

I also thought I would be in the minority in the audience.

How I was wrong.

manhood, the discussion degenerated into a shouting match in which our voices got the upper hand. Women in the audience complained about men not stepping up to the plate, while some men retaliated with veiled endorsements of violence. It was not pretty.

And for the first time in my life, I found myself being sympathetic with the men feeling that their role in their own self-definition was being usurped. However, I don't think it was usurped by women. It was usurped by our persistent lack of clarity on the issues.

I was especially more sympathetic when a brilliant young man in the audience expressed disappointment with the discussion, complaining that he had come expecting to hear the experiences of ordinary men, of fathers, husbands, boyfriends, and men in the workplace, and all he got was a narrative of perpetual crisis. I too, wanted to hear the stories this man was asking for, because those stories are what indicate whether there's a crisis or not. Unfortunately, he sounded as if he was if he was saying that there is no crisis of masculinity, and that sent temperatures a notch higher.

Ironically, though, at the session of misogyny in the media the previous day, women had been told that life stories – which are the main item many of us women consume from the media – were considered by media houses to be “soft news,” of less premium than “hard news” on sports, business and politics that is often dominated by men and insulting to women. We were informed that female TV anchors have been reduced to catwalk models because, apparently, the media houses are cynically glued to the high ratings that follow the swing of the hips rather than the words from the lips. If women want the headlines to go in their favor, the argument followed, women have to show that they're interested in “hard news.”

However, a number of us totally disagree that life stories, fashion and gossip is “soft” news. As the ever admirable Wambui Mwangi, one of the panelists, reminded us, we consider our life stories as mothers, housewives, house helps, sex workers, mistresses and professional women, very political. These issues are about labor, remuneration, access to opportunity and social value. So the roles that we play are as “hard news” as they come. If anything, these issues should be the headlines, not the sick games that politicians are playing.

A day later, I witnessed the men's stories being treated the same way; they were missing from the conversation because they were also devalued as “soft news.”

But more important for me, was the gender patterns in the audiences of the sessions. On Saturday as well, there were two concurrent sessions, one on art for social and political causes, and another on African romance. It almost goes without saying that there were more men in the first and a majority comprising of women in the second.

Add that to the fact that the “Future of men” session had more women than men, and you’ll see a pattern that confirms my argument about our life stories being disconnected from political issues. From our attendance, it is evident that we ladies are interested in knowing how to kiss, to be good wives and lovers, or raise the boys some of us have been left to take care of on our own. But we don’t see how those desires are intertwined with politics, and so politics is of less interest to us. The media has disconnected the two and relegated our issues to quirky stories for the middle sections of the paper. But at least our stories are in the middle of the paper. The men’s stories are nowhere to be found.

So the problem of our political consciousness is essentially a class one: the media has reduced “news” to soap operas about the rich and the famous, about their political alliances, about the village funeral at which they danced over the weekend, and about who is for the referendum or for the president. Yet the shenanigans of corruption, laziness and arrogance of the Mpigs affect our economic and social life, since they interfere with our ability to be friends, spouses, parents, lovers and providers for our families. The Mpigs eat into resources that could give us recreation facilities like parks so that our youth can go on dates without needing to go to Java, provide public transport for people to easily get to work, provide good education that make us love one another from a position of consciousness, and provide good social services that facilitate the growth of commerce and subsequently of employment.

There’s a beautiful Maasai folk tale that I often quote as a wonderful story of how women and men are struggling with the same monster. A pair of lovers arranged to meet in a secret place. On her way to the agreed meeting point, the woman was captured by an ogre. To delay the ogre eating her, she demanded that the ogre lays her on specifically the fragrant matasia leaves. And she sang. And because of her song, and her wit, the warrior found the ogre and killed it.

Women and men are facing the same ogre. However, instead of women singing, they are screeching, because we don’t have confidence that the men will find us, since so many men have let us down. Meanwhile, the men, instead of seeing our delaying tactics and songs as a vote of confidence in them, and as an indicator of where the ogre is, they stamp out our songs and suppress our intelligence through betrayal, exploitation, and feeling intimidated by a woman going to school and earning a

others' throats at every election.

Comments

Jacquie →

22/09/2014 6:28pm

I wanted to attend this session to hear what they had to say. It seems not much. I'll say this:

If I was asked to describe Kenyan men in one word, I say "Misogynist". And on most days, I'm terrified of most of them.

The future I dream of? A world where boys are taught that girls are not the enemy; the bogeyman who is out to finish the male species. Girls are not lesser. That being a real man isn't equal to dehumanizing another human being in order to be OK with who you are. That being a man is not about looking away and saying 'Not all men'. That comradeship should never be more important than doing the right thing, the human thing. That sexism is NOT cool even when hidden behind 'irony' or 'humor' or 'African' or 'It's not that serious'

The future I dream of? Is the day guys like Oyunga Pala and Biko use their talent and influence to call out the bullshit. But then, for this to happen, they have to truly believe that girls are NOT the enemy.

Reply

Wandia

22/09/2014 6:52pm

Thank you for your comment. I was hoping for that message too.

The truth is, when you have been cheated so long that you are entitled to power and privilege, but you don't see it in concrete terms, you become nervous and prefer to zero in on small targets rather look at the real bigger enemies. So men in Kenya are brainwashed to think women are the problem, yet 95% who are not power are

battles. That's what I wanted to hear, a conversation about "what are people in power doing to us men?" "Why are we killing our women?"

It was just an unpleasant session.

Reply

Jacquie →

22/09/2014 9:05pm

I'm sorry it was that bad. I'm curious: is it just an issue of economic power? The men I work and interact with are all well educated, well to do individuals...some are even considered 'nice' some are fathers with daughters...and yet, beneath the surface there is a resentment that lingers and sometimes it will rear its head. Like they just HAVE to make you know 'your place. So much so that as a lady, you find yourself being extra careful what you say...try not to draw too much attention to your strong willed spirit, your mind, your accomplishments, your beauty...watch how you dress...Even 'nice' guys seem to comfortable looking away and get defensive instead of saying 'there is a problem'".

And as women, do we make it worse? We 'teach' the girl child, but what is the 'boy child' taught at home by the women in his life? By shrugging and saying "oh well, all African men are like that," have we made it worse?

Wandia

22/09/2014 11:17pm

Women are never to blame.

It's not our short skirts, our education, our jobs, our rejection of oppression, our raising boys on our own because the fathers are not there, or telling girls they are human.

We are not to blame.

Our men have been bamboozled out of their humanity and are looking for scapegoats that are easy to attack. They need to have a million-march and get their act together.

Reply

Clifford

23/09/2014 3:28pm

I grew up surrounded and taught by very strong men. I would like to share this and then take it up from there.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/clifford-chianga-oluoch/happy-fathers-day-dad/10151643865841768>

Reply

philo →

23/09/2014 9:22pm

Real life stories, the so called soft features were disdained by old and conservative journalists even in my time. StoryMoja Fest is great. It is however, not really a radical forum. What makes many exasperated is that this ARGUMENT On Soft NEws and etc is so OLD! We faced it in the 90s and it is part of even fiction from Kenya! In Leading the Night by Philo Ikonya (yes, me) Rika is dealing with this and such realities. She is insulted for being a feminist. We can do more to bring out our own voices to try and push to see change in our own times. Thank you Wandia.