Conversation

Living Feminist Politics - Amina Mama interviews Winnie Byanyima

Winnie Byanyima is MP for Mbarara Municipality in Western Uganda. The daughter of two well-known politicians, she was a gifted scholar and won awards to pursue graduate studies in aeronautical engineering. However, she chose to join the National Resistance Movement under Museveni's leadership, and later became one of the first women to stand successfully for direct elections. Winnie is best known for her gender advocacy work with non-governmental organisations, her anti-corruption campaigns, and her opposition to Uganda's involvement in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is currently affiliated to the African Gender Institute, where she is writing a memoir of three generations of women – her grandmother, her mother and her own life in politics.

Here she is interviewed by Amina Mama on behalf of ***Feminist Africa****.*

Amina Mama: Let's begin by talking about your early life, and some of the formative influences.

Winnie Byanyima: I grew up pretty much my father's daughter. I admired him very much, and people said I was like him. I had a more difficult relationship with my mother. But in the last few years as I've tried to reflect on who I am and why I believe the things that I believe, I've found myself coming back to my mother and my grandmother, and having to face the fact that I take a lot from those women. It's tough, because it means that I must recognise all that I didn't take as important about my mother's struggles. So I am taking time to reflect on who these older women were, the struggles they went through, and how they made them who they were so that they could also shape me.

AM: What was it like growing up in Uganda ?

WB: Uganda was newly independent in the 1960s. During those years my childhood was sheltered and stable. But in the late 1960s, Ugandan politics became very turbulent. My parents – being in the opposition – were very vulnerable, and were at the centre of resistance against a regime that was becoming more and more dictatorial. At home there was so much uncertainty and upheaval. On the other hand, school life was normal. We were sent to a convent where the nuns gave us a sense of stability.

My mother left her teaching job to raise us and became a community leader. She built networks with women in the village, and started village women's clubs. Similar clubs were set up all over the country and were supported by the government. There was a community development structure that worked through government officials. These officials recruited volunteers like my mother to organise local clubs, and the government would provide a curriculum and simple training materials so that the clubs could engage in income generation, skills training and things like that.

One of the first structures to go during the first round of World Bank-supported public sector reforms in the early 1990's was community development. The elaborate structure that linked grassroots women's rights activists (like my mother) with a facilitating central government community development department was broken up in a down-sizing exercise, and later on further disjointed by decentralisation. When I was growing up, the majority of women had no formal education at all. They learnt how to read and write through those clubs, they learnt about homemaking, childcare, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, income generation, important life skills. I remember doing competitions and having fun with women in our village of Ruti. The clubs also enabled women to connect with other women and practice leadership skills. The women's movement in Uganda grew from these roots. It was painful to see those

structures being thrown out of the window during the reforms.

AM: Would you call these community-based groups a women's movement? They existed long before what is now internationally known as feminism, and before contemporary women's movements.

WB: It was a women's movement, and a vibrant one at that. My mother taught these women how to read and write so that they could have eyes to the outside world. I remember them saying, “I'm not going to let this man take my child out of school, he is saying that there is no money to keep my daughter in school, but I'm going to sell all the fruit in the garden so that my daughter will stay in school”. The right of girls to education, the right to control family size, to inherit property on the death of a husband – these were some of the issues women in these clubs talked about and struggled over in their households and communities.

AM: So they became a route to self-assertiveness and independence?

WB: Exactly, yes. A lot of women my age got an education because their mothers were in those clubs – as a result, they were able to see the value in education and to assert their daughters' right to education. So there were many spin-offs in terms of rights and opportunities for women through those clubs.

AM: What were things in your own early life that influenced your own career choices? Did you ever imagine that you would become such a well-known politician? What career did you envisage when you were at university?

WB: Even at an early age, I admired the work that my father did. By the time I was nine, I was reading the newspapers and discussing the stories with him. I was going to the local party office with him and nosing around. I was already deeply interested in political and social work. At school, I was a fairly smart girl, and I was encouraged to study science and mathematics.

I went on to study engineering, really to defy society's expectations for a girl. There wasn't much guidance on careers then. In my second year at university, I realised that I was taking a course where 98% of the graduates were going to be absorbed into making weapons for the Cold War, and that was not what I wanted to do with my life. At the end of my first degree, I won an international fellowship (I was the first African woman to win Zonta International's Amelia Earhart Fellowship), and was supposed to start working on a project that was a precursor of President Reagan's Star Wars programme. It involved research on how to use water hydrolysis to propel satellites into space. But I went into political activism instead, and abandoned aeronautics.

AM: You left aeronautical engineering and a prestigious fellowship to go to the bush?!

WB: After my first degree, I joined Museveni in London; at that time, he was building the political movement that would lead to the armed struggle. I assisted him for six months as he held meetings with several exiled Ugandan groups and raised funds for the armed struggle, which he had already launched. When it was time for him to return to the bush, he claimed that the conditions in the bush were still unsafe for women, so he asked me either to relocate to Zimbabwe, or to return to Uganda and work with others who were supporting the guerrilla war clandestinely. We had a major debate over this. I did not understand how a woman could hope to be an equal participant in this Uganda that he was trying to build, if she could be told “you cannot participate in the struggle at this stage because it's too rough”. He gave me a long explanation about the proper role of a woman in African society. I remember him telling me that a good woman should remain in the background and give support from there.

I was 22, and had been exposed to some feminist ideas as a university student, reading books like Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. I couldn't accept his position. If we were going to be equals in the Uganda of the future, we had to be prepared to struggle side-by-side with men at every stage. Museveni believed in developing us ideologically for the struggle and recommended texts for us to read and discuss. Some of the books he bought me were about the Vietnamese War, the Chinese Communist revolution, FRELIMO's struggle in Mozambique and the Algerian liberation struggle.

AM: All of which had women in the frontlines?

WB: Yes - so there was a contradiction. For example, he asked me to read Engel's The Origin of the Family, but the conclusions I drew were different from his. He concluded that the family was a middle-class invention and he argued that working-class people didn't really have family values, which were all about accumulating and maintaining property. I bought that, but the essay was a route for me to read more about feminism, capitalism and patriarchy. I discovered more about women and the roles they played in guerrilla movements, and how they were short-changed after these struggles, and discovered feminist criticism of the construction of citizenship. I would try to engage Museveni in discussions about these issues, but he warned me that I was in danger of becoming “obscurantist” - the word he used. He said if I tried to bring such debates to combatants who were mainly peasants, I would most likely alienate them from the real struggle against dictatorship. He argued that challenging patriarchal culture would confuse peasants and introduce secondary struggles in the main struggle.

AM: So in what capacities did he deploy you and other women in the National Resistance Movement (NRM)?

WB: I went back to Uganda and waited for him to make contact with me. A few women went to the bush directly - they forced their way there, because he didn't invite them. Very few came from the middle classes. One such woman eventually became a member of the National Executive Committee, the highest organ of the Movement; by the end of the war, there were two women on it: Gertrude Njuba and Olive Zizinga.

The others were peasant women, some of whom became combatants, but their growth in the guerrilla army was stunted because at first they were like wives of officers. Later on, there was a move to get women out of the camps because of the lack of discipline. So they had to decide which women were soldiers and which were just wives. The wives had to go to a Red Cross camp, and a unit was created for those who stayed as combatants. The unit didn't achieve much because there was no proper policy. Many women who became pregnant stopped serving. But civilian peasant women made important contributions to the NRM guerrilla war, and their roles were acknowledged. Some women were sent to locate enemy positions and to determine their strength. They also went behind enemy lines to look for food, and some were involved in political organising. When soldiers were injured, they needed to be hidden with certain families, treated, and taken to hospital for surgery, and women did those tasks.

Some women were involved in diplomatic work and political negotiations. I was involved in the peace process negotiations. The diplomatic work was not simple, because at that time Museveni was perceived as a communist. This was because of his earlier left-wing political activism, and because we had used the strategy of a protracted people's war, commonly associated with the Chinese Communists.

AM: Would these women have been bearing arms?

WB: No. Most were civilians. But even in the case of combatants, there were not enough arms for all the women to have guns. But much later on, when we got enough guns, almost every combatant had a gun. This was during the last year of the war.

AM: What was one of your most memorable moments during that period of your involvement with the NRM and that war against the state?

WB: When we took the capital, Kampala - that was a big achievement. But 18 years later, I'm at a point where I feel that those who died did so in vain. I feel that dictatorship and militarism are still with us. Politicians do not respect people's rights. They oppress and cheat the poor. Poor people are still powerless, poverty is deepening, and armed conflict is still raging on in parts of the country. So now I find it hard to look at the fall of Kampala on 25 January 1986 as a success. I see it as an adventure that I was involved in as a young and idealistic girl. I feel that those who led us, if they once had true aspirations to liberate and empower all Ugandans, they have long since abandoned them.

But all is not lost. In the first few years after that war, some changes were beneficial to the people. Some peace and stability was restored by putting the army back in the barracks. There was also some economic recovery, as well as reconstruction of the physical and social infrastructure, but these gains are being threatened by growing militarism, runaway corruption and civil strife.

AM: And from the women's point of view?

WB: It's a mixed bag. When we came to power, there was a need to neutralise the existing dominant political forces. Mobilising previously excluded groups was seen as a key strategy to neutralise the old political forces. So the project was not really to empower women in their own right - the real agenda was to empower the grassroots in order to neutralise elitist forces. Women were thus an instrument for another political agenda. And even as spaces were being opened for women in the state, their capacity to organise autonomously was being challenged. They were being co-opted. But most women were excited and new to politics; it was too early to debate those kinds of questions. Even now, it's still a challenge to raise such issues.

AM: The NRM was important for us in two ways. Firstly, it was a revolutionary movement, and secondly it was the first time on the continent that a force had overthrown a government that had a conventional army. So it was an exciting moment for the whole continent. But tell me how you felt?

WB: It was a very exciting time, and there were many unique things about our struggle. We took power during the Cold War, when Africa was still divided between those who supported the West and those who had socialist, Marxist-Leninist regimes. We were very independent; we were saying that we were aligned to neither. Ours was a fiercely African nationalist position. We felt that Africa had suffered in the Cold War and our interests and been submerged, with Africans trapped between the hostilities of the East and West. By waging our struggle without any support from either, we were aware that we were setting a precedent that some might want to emulate and others might fear.

We were committed to dismantling the neo-colonial state. To do this, we needed to empower Ugandans to control the politics and the economy. Politics was characterised by polarisation between two elitist, male-dominated political parties. It had reached the point where one side would use the army to manipulate elections, and to prop up an illegitimate civilian government. There was a need to bring the majority of Ugandans into the political process. We saw an opportunity to end the domination of our politics by a narrow, neo-colonial elite

by engaging groups of people previously excluded from formal politics, and that's how the political empowerment of women was conceived, as I explained above. It was a period of great optimism. Political cadres were saying “we are going to empower the people, we are going to the grassroots to elect resistance committees so that the people can decide their own fate, take development into their own hands”.

AM: This was in 1986?

WB: Yes, that was an exciting period and I was proud to be part of a revolution that was giving the ordinary person a voice.

AM: So the women were there?

WB: As soon as we came to power, the project of engaging women in the local councils - we called them Resistance Councils – started. On every RC of nine people, one had to be a woman, and the other eight positions could also go to women if they were elected. I attended several international meetings where I talked about this reawakening, and also published articles about it. During this period, I went back overseas to study for a Masters degree in Environment and Energy Conservation. After that, I took up a diplomatic post at UNESCO.

AM: How were you received when you returned to contest a seat in parliament?

WB: First, I went to the President. He was vague, and having worked with him for a long time, I knew that vagueness was a no. He referred me to the National Political Commissioner, who categorically said no. He gave me a very silly reason: “We don't want you to upset the Catholics.” I said, “You do know that I'm a Catholic, too!”

I also went back to my mother and father. They were not supporters of the Movement. My father never trusted revolutionaries, so he said that this was my opportunity to strike out independently: “Forget about the Movement, just go and present yourself and your views, since it's an individual merit election.” My parents supported me, and so did some senior NRM cadres and former combatants who did not care that the official Movement was not on my side.

AM: How did women in the Movement respond to your interest?

WB: I had been in the NRM much longer than any of them. So I thought it would surely excite them that I was going to contest a mainstream seat and not a women's seat. But I was disappointed. Some of them did not even want to be seen talking with me. The exception was Victoria Sekitoleko, then Minister of Agriculture, who gave me strong support. I think that most of the women politicians were insecure. They didn't know whether it was safe for them to endorse my candidature, and they wanted to protect their own positions. This has been characteristic of women in politics in Uganda. Many don't feel strong enough in their own right and find it difficult to take controversial positions, or positions that are not favoured by the government. Anyway, I entered the race.

AM: On your own?

WB: The Movement secretly had its favoured candidates. I emphasised to the voters that I had a track record in the Movement, and this gave me an edge over my opponents who were relatively new in the NRM. I also chose to have a strongly feminist platform. Some people advised me that this was suicidal. But we were being elected to debate and enact a constitution, an exercise that happens maybe once in the history of a nation. I saw this as a chance to build the house in which Ugandans would live forever. How could I miss the

opportunity to make it a house where men and women are equal? I counted on a strong women's vote, and I felt that young men would also vote for me because I represented change. I was radical and perceived as a liberator, so I thought if I could get women to bank on a woman leader, then I wouldn't mind sacrificing some chauvinistic votes. I had some serious handicaps. I lived an unconventional life. I was still unmarried, but lived with a man. I was in my 30s, but had no children. But young people saw me as one of them. When I declared my candidature, all of a sudden, 14 other people declared their candidature. It was like “If this woman can do it, why can't I?”

AM: Can you give an example of the strategies you used in your campaign?

WB: I used to recount a conversation with one of my uncles: “Winnie, I have one child and three miserable girls.” So the girls are not children?! The moment I'd share this, the women would all start shaking their heads. I would begin my discussion of gender issues with this point - that our society gives very low value to a girl and a woman; that what we do doesn't count; traditionally, and in government policies and the laws, we are of no value. So I would conclude with the promise that I would go to the Constituent Assembly to give value to a girl child and to a woman. Then I would list the positions I was going to take.

This really excited women. The day I was first elected was the most important and happiest in my life. Women ran out on the streets after my result was announced. They were carrying anything they could to show victory, they sat in the middle of the road, they climbed on top of the cars. The National Political Commissar who had opposed me drove past, and he was frightened because there was no room for his car on the road. He had to get off the street because of the screaming women. They were ululating and even taking off their tops, they walked miles and miles around the town celebrating.

AM: How have you as a woman politician experienced your relationship with your colleagues who are now leaders and presidents?

WB: In the mid-1980s, I travelled to many African countries as part of a high-powered NRM delegation. We were still a guerrilla movement, and we went on a diplomatic mission to seek political and diplomatic support from African leaders. We met several presidents, some of whom I met again after we came to power.

I met President Samora Machel of Mozambique about a year before he was killed. I was struck by the fact that he was a small man – I had read about him and his great contribution in FRELIMO's heroic struggle against Portuguese colonialism. I admired him greatly and had drawn this picture of him in my mind of a big, strong man. I was surprised to find that I was taller than him! He was a strange combination: very aware of himself as a historical figure, but also a very humble person. He would talk loudly, but the words coming out of his mouth were full of humility. I was the most junior member of the delegation and was quietly taking notes, but he paused at some point and wanted to know about me as a person. The more I told him about my background, the more interested he became. He told us Ugandans were lucky to have such numbers of professional, qualified people like myself, a woman with a degree in aeronautical engineering. He contrasted this with what he had inherited at independence in Mozambique, and what they were trying to do to build their human capacity, against so many odds.

He made such an impression on me. I felt I was in the presence of a great leader. I was touched by the sincerity with which he told us about the problems Mozambique was facing from the RENAMO insurgents, even after signing the Nkomati accords. I had not heard an African male political leader own up to weakness and express vulnerability before – politics is full of posturing.

After that, we had months of working with President Moi. He was a strange man. He lived in this huge State house with no family – or if he had one, it was so private nobody knew about it. I saw a lot of the African patriarch in him - he liked to give handouts. That appalled me! The first time our delegation went to meet him, he gave each of us a small envelope. It was demeaning, but we were told that this was the culture that had evolved in Kenya - if you meet the President, you must go away with an envelope. All of us, including Museveni, felt uncomfortable, although we could not offend President Moi by not accepting them. But now I have seen President Museveni himself handing out envelopes at public functions!

AM: They say that it has some traditional antecedent.

WB: What I object to is that it is a way of presenting the leader as a benefactor who satisfies the needs of his subjects. He stops being the servant of the people and becomes the provider to the people, and that's what disgusts me. During the constitutional process, I spoke strongly against this culture of seeking platforms on the basis of “I am going to make you eat”, “I am going to provide”, and I continue to speak against it. The final outcome is that the leader becomes a very corrupt person. But struggling against this is like swimming against a strong tide. I have tried very hard to project myself to the people as their worker - like a social worker - someone who is there to listen, to support, to counsel, to help in solving community problems. I say, “I am your employee”. But I find that people's expectation is that I should be a big woman who stands above them, lives differently from them, and who has so much to give to them. I keep trying, but I do not even appear sincere. Some people think that I am pretending, and others see me as an impotent politician. I have to use that word, because men have associated potency with the function of being a political leader, and if you push for different values, you are seen as impotent.

Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso was different. He took us to see the programmes he had started that were involving people in raising incomes, building the country. He was tackling some of the problems that Africa is waking up to only now. NEPAD is focusing on physical infrastructure – well, Sankara was talking about that and mobilising people, rather than waiting for a loan from the World Bank. That was remarkable.

There was so much dynamism in this young man, but there was something a bit flashy about him that made me uneasy. He was one of those in a hurry, who has got a vision, who is pushing it forcefully, so much so that he could easily become intolerant. There was a militaristic push behind his programme that made me uncomfortable as well, even though I also came from a guerrilla movement.

The most remarkable leader I met was Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. I am richer for having met him. Our delegation met him in his modest house by the beach at Msasani, and we talked at length over two or three days. He behaved like an intellectual talking to other intellectuals, debating issues, not lecturing. He listened carefully to what we were saying before asking more questions and offering his opinion. That is not typical of powerful people.

AM: No, it's very rare.

WB: The first thing a person who comes to power loses is the capacity to listen. Nyerere talked about his role in Uganda. When Museveni went to the bush, he fought Tanzanian troops still in Uganda, and some of them were killed. Eventually Nyerere withdrew them, but there was still unfinished business between the two leaders when we went to this meeting. It was clear that Nyerere was still sore about the NRM challenging him in Uganda and killing his soldiers. Museveni was at his most humble, and said he was sorry, so Nyerere said it was okay, closed that chapter and never referred to it again.

He told us about his plans to relinquish power, he told us about his mistakes. He talked about the unjust global economic order, and admitted that he had not really thought through how he could take peasants out of subsistence agriculture to become commercial farmers and exporters in the global economy. He criticised himself for failing on the side of economic policy, but said that it had not been wrong in principle to go for self-sufficiency. It was powerful and so touching. He also talked about what Tanzanians had achieved: “We got almost all Tanzanian children to go to primary school, and to be literate.”

AM: He's right. These are the things that get forgotten … achievements that were made, but which have been set back under the current dispensation.

WB: Yes, this was the man who was preaching human development and participatory development before these words came into vogue at the United Nations. But he was not looking for credit. The message I got was that he was not opening up to a multiparty system and stepping down out of love for liberal democracy. He seemed to be saying that Africa was even more dominated in the new world order, and having been at the frontline of the struggle for Africa 's independence, he did not want to have to make new concessions he did not agree with. He had struggled during the Cold War and wanted to pass the baton on. Nyerere was not optimistic about the so-called wave of democratisation sweeping through Africa.

I also got to meet Kenneth Kaunda, Muammar Gaddafir (who supplied us with many copies of his Green Book), Sadiq El Mahdi, who was briefly Prime Minister of Sudan, Chief Abiola, who ran for president in Nigeria but died in prison, Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Wa Za Banda, whose long praise names were engraved on a wall at the airport. The translation of his name, we were told, was “The all powerful warrior who because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake”! I went to a conference in Ivory Coast, and visited Yamoussoukro, a city without people and a grandiose Basilica surrounded by a sea of poverty, and met the ailing President Felix Houphouet-Biogny. I met veterans of the liberation wars, leftist intellectuals who fought liberation wars from their universities, multimillionaires like Tiny Rowland (once described as “the unacceptable face of capitalism”), whose business empire spanned the length and breadth of the continent. Everywhere I went, I observed powerful men shaping the destiny of our continent.

That whole period helped me as a woman in politics. I was seeing how these men used their power, and how masculinity and patriarchy operate. I realised how important it was to think through one's type of leadership. A leader should have a clear vision of the society she or he wants to build, and what her or his role is in that project. A leader should be compassionate and have the deepest respect for the people she or he leads. We have to be careful about symbols and about language, because they carry powerful messages to the people. Meeting these leaders helped me to focus on these questions and to understand that as a woman, I look at the world in a different way, and could make a different contribution.

AM: Can we come back to militarism? To the militaristic aggression that is characterising the emergence of the new global world economy and world order. I wonder if you would like to comment on that?

WB: In this global environment where our economies don't work, where levels of poverty keep increasing, where desperation and exploitation are eating into the lives of people, and when you have the same few powerful countries that are causing this economic exploitation superficially insisting that we must embrace liberal democracy, you get a situation where groups emerge that will play to the agenda of democratising, while they are actually just securing control of poor and marginalised people by force.

So we get pseudo-democracies covering up for greater militarisation. You will find a Congo that is not under a dictator like Mobutu, and which appears to be democratising, but which is actually more militaristic than when it was under Mobutu. You get a Sierra Leone, or a Liberia, where you have elections, but the level of militarisation is greater than when there was a dictator. You get the new breed: a Zenawi, a Museveni, a Kagame. These are military leaders who have held elections, but whose countries are not yet completely liberated from the hold of the military. The processes of empowering people can be hijacked or derailed by a few leaders who have foreign backing.

In a country like Uganda, every problem has a military answer. If you want to increase the revenue base, deploy the army. If you want to make sure that teachers actually teach very large classes, in order to achieve universal primary education, you ask the security man in the district to oversee the education programme. To make the police force more efficient at investigation and enforcing law and order, fuse it with the military. To manage security in elections, deploy the army. Slowly we are returning to military dictatorship that is disguised as a democracy.

Who can think outside the box, who can move us forward? We need leaders who are able to say, “I'm going to push the envelope as far as I can. It may cost me personally, but if there is a gain for the continent, then that's fine.” I am afraid we don't have many people like that. Instead, we have people who want to consolidate their own personal power. Men are like that. Even women are like that. But we do have the advantage that our lives drive us to question and to develop feminist consciousness, which can lead us to offer powerful alternatives.

AM: Finally - when you look at the global turn of events, the increasing loss and abdication of sovereignty by states, at global militarisation - what makes you continue as a politician, and where do you draw energy and inspiration from?

WB: Ah, just a love of life and a passion for justice. What gives me inspiration is the history of Africa; our rich history of ancient civilisations, of heroic struggles against domination and of individual sacrifice and achievement, like that of Nelson Mandela. You can take many things away from us, but you can't take that away. Coming from different experiences, and shaped by different cultures, we can take the best from our past and lead a struggle for global justice.

AM: Thank you very much.

Winnie Byanyima is in her third term as an elected legislator in the Parliament of Uganda. She is a member of the Budget Committee and the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee of Parliament. She is also the third Vice-chair of the Reform Agenda, a political pressure group in Uganda active on issues of human rights and democratisation. She has recently been appointed as Director of Women, Gender and Development at the African Union Commission.