

## **Women's Empowerment: The Insights of Wangari Maathai**

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Abstract: Wangari Maathai of Kenya has written about empowerment, practiced it in many ways in her own life, and shared her reflections on it with many other women in the Green Belt Movement. Yet to date, no study has been devoted to her ideas on the topic. This paper will highlight Maathai's insights regarding empowerment, tracing several important themes in her approach, namely, empowerment's relationship to self esteem, teamwork, and political action, its ambivalent relationship to formal education, and the role of cultural traditions in providing alternatives to colonial-era cultural impositions and current exploitative effects of neo-liberal capitalism. After reviewing Maathai's thoughts on each of these topics, I will briefly draw upon other East African thinkers and Africanists' studies of East African communities to present corroborating evidence for Maathai's views or for challenges to her position. Listening to the perspectives of Maathai and other East Africans provides several important correctives to current popular uses of the term "empowerment."

Keywords: empowerment, women's education, East Africa, gender, equality, poverty, Wangari Maathai, Green Belt Movement, Kenya

Women's empowerment, women's education, women's equality: everyone agrees that these are all good things and worthy goals. But what exactly do these things mean? And what do they mean in an East African context? What forms of empowerment, education and equality are truly liberating, and what forms are deceptive, seeming to offer liberation while in reality serving to tie women down in some new and subtle way? The purpose of this paper is to explore these issues from the perspective of a remarkable East African woman, Wangari Maathai. For too long, we in

the West have approached issues of empowerment, education and equality from our own perspective only, as if we were the only ones in the world who truly knew what these words meant. But even a cursory glance at our own societies, rife as they are with problems and injustices of all kinds, should give the lie to such presumption. In our dialogue with our third world neighbours, it is perhaps we who have the most to learn.

But perhaps a quick biographical note is in order before we begin. Wangari Maathai was born in Kenya in 1940. She studied biology in the United States during the 1960s, and then held research and teaching positions at the University of Nairobi. In 1971 she completed her doctorate in Veterinary Anatomy, becoming the first East African woman to earn a PhD. Maathai began her career as an activist while still at the university, campaigning for equal benefits for the female employees. But it is as founder of the Green Belt Movement (GBM) that she has had her greatest impact. This movement has involved 100,000 women activists establishing 600 community networks, running 6,000 nurseries, and planting 30 million trees to reverse environmental damage in Kenya (2007, 175). In addition, Maathai has worked for a whole host of other activist organizations and written several books about her experiences. Rob Nixon correctly describes Maathai as a “writer-activist,” whose writings “give imaginative definition to the slow violence inflicted in the global South” (2011). In addition to numerous protests, Maathai also became active in traditional politics, serving as a member of Parliament, and also as Assistant Minister for the Environment, Natural Resources, and Wildlife. In 2004, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2006 the French Legion of Honor.

Surprisingly, though, Maathai’s work and writings have received little notice from the philosophical community. A search through past issues of the *Journal of Global Ethics* finds only one mention of Maathai, a mention which basically just notes

that she was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2004. And a search in *Philosopher's Index* across all categories finds no mention of Maathai at all. Wondering how Maathai's and others' writings from the global South can so often be excluded from the lists of key course readings in environmental humanities courses, Nixon terms this "Americanist bias" (2011).<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Maathai's writing has been the subject of several good studies focusing on her rhetoric, especially her use of narrative, effective tropes, and "suasory argumentation" (Gorsevski 2012; Kirkscey 2007), as well as gender analyses of how the media has portrayed her (Worthington 2003) and analyses of how she was able to effectively use nonviolent action to bring change to Kenya (Cesar 2010; Nixon 2006–2007, 2011). But the magnitude of her accomplishment points to the need to study her writings more seriously. We need to attend not just to her style of rhetoric, or how the media has portrayed her, or what tactics she has used, but also and most importantly to the content of her message.

### **Empowerment: more than just increased purchasing power or career-building**

What do we mean by the term "empowerment"? We must avoid thinking of empowerment only within a western capitalist context. For example, Desiree Lewis argues that state-engineered "transformation" based on neo-liberal development paradigms often uses the phrases "gender equality" and "women's empowerment" in ways that are "superficial and complacent" (2008, 83). In other words, they use these popular phrases in ways that do not ask for justice but only "power within the status quo," presuming that women's only aspirations are to gain men's privileges for themselves (84). She in fact recommends simply dropping empowerment talk because of the way it has failed to promote "situations and conditions that may lie beyond existing class and gender models of material achievement and public success" (ibid.).

Still, women theorists have addressed the topic of the concept of empowerment, and before turning to Maathai's contribution I would like to survey a few helpful studies. Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire have constructed a table of different connotations of the term "empowerment" from a survey of development literature (2007, 380–381). They found great commonality among the different descriptions of empowerment, with the majority focusing on developing insight into social and structural inhibitors of flourishing, so that individuals can change their perspectives and actions, and join in community with others, to change their context so that they can more easily achieve well-being. I found this emphasis on empowerment acting as a counter to existing inhibitors to be described succinctly by Amy Allen as "the capacity of an agent to act in spite of, or in response to, the power wielded over her by others" (1998:34).

I found that Christine Koggel supplied a particularly helpful definition of empowerment as "the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions" (2009, 250). Koggel sees empowerment as a process of change on both individual and collective levels that enhances social agency so that people can take purposeful and effective action to change their world and to combat systemic impediments to their freedom. Importantly, Koggel insists that we should not think of empowerment as an individualistic or competitive process.

Uma Narayan points out that the equality of all persons is not simply a "Western" philosophical notion: "the doctrines of equality and rights, rather than being pure 'products of Western imperialism' were often important products of such struggles *against Western imperialism*" (2000, 91). Narayan refers to the many political struggles of women and excluded groups—such as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in both Western (abolitionist and suffragette movements) and non-Western (the anti-colonial

struggles of India, Africa, and elsewhere) contexts—who helped to give new meaning to an anemic and minimalist conception of equality in the Western philosophical tradition.

While the United States Declaration of Independence, based on Lockean philosophical principles, declared “all men are created equal” and “they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights” (1776/2013), the United States Constitution did not prevent practices of slavery and the disenfranchisement of American Indians and women. Narayan’s critique would suggest, not just that there was a discrepancy between stated ideals and policies, but that the concept “equality” was not yet fully understood and that its contemporary understanding is not the result of Euro-American male philosophers. It is with this hope of more fully understanding the concept “empowerment” that we take into account the struggles and writings of African women like Wangari Maathai.

### **Empowerment: both individual and collective**

One of the strengths of Maathai’s work is that she emphasizes empowerment on both the individual and community levels. In *The Green Belt Movement* ([1985] 2004), Maathai explains how her organization promoted empowerment (which she termed boosting women’s confidence) through civic education. She promoted empowerment on the community level so that it could lead to community mobilization (2004, 68–69). In her latest book, *Replenish the Earth* (2010), she explains that she started her work in the GBM with a focus on saving trees and the environment. Eventually, she noticed the need to increase women’s self-confidence, help them to find their authentic voice, and expand democratic space so that their voices could be heard (14).

Chapter seven of *Replenish the Earth*, entitled “Self-Empowerment,” focuses on improving one’s own life through self-reliance. She drives home her message: the power to change is within yourself (2010, 15, 130). Nonetheless, her goal is not to foster narrow, self-interested behavior even though responsibility rests with the individual. Her next chapter emphasizes committing oneself to selfless service for the common good. Clearly, this understanding of the term resonates with Koggel’s opinion that empowerment does not need to be understood in individualistic or competitive terms.

It’s important to note that we have to be careful to avoid becoming caught in a chicken-egg dilemma regarding individual and community empowerment. We cannot presume that individuals are suddenly going to gain self-confidence on their own, and then join a group. Self-empowerment grows best in a context of group support. Indeed, as far as which comes first, according to her own description in the previous paragraph, Maathai worked with groups first, and then came to appreciate the fact that belonging to a group is not enough: one must internalize the positive messages one hears in the group in order to have courage to act alone or with others. But then, she went back to the group experience and realized she had to build within the group learning experiences that paid particular attention to the need for growth in self-confidence of each individual person.

Not all group activities are liberatory. Maathai recognized sources of disempowerment in her community’s practices. For example, she saw the Pentecostal vigil, seemingly vigorous in its use of active song and dance, as an example of “disheartening passivity,” as participants beg God to turn attention toward the people’s plight and save the day, “forsaking all belief in their own ability” (2010, 143). She bemoaned people forsaking the opportunity to empower themselves by leaving all in

God's hands. By contrast, GBM seminars teach women that God wants them to do something about their situation (143, 147).

Maathai developed a personal philosophy that helped her to cope with adversity. She realized the importance of cultivating a higher consciousness within oneself to become willing to do what one believes is right, regardless of popular opinion. One of the first pamphlets that she wrote for the GBM told about searching for what she calls the "roots" of disempowerment (2004, 165). In conversations with many Kenyans, she found that they tended to blame the government for all their problems, belittling the role that citizens could play. Maathai would instead point out to them that they themselves were part of the problem, "by not standing up for what they strongly believed in" (173). Also, they had internalized foreign values by reducing the value of the environment to money (174).

Looking at Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed* (2007), we see a complex consideration of the influence of "foreign" values. For while Maathai claimed that foreign capitalist values were a bad influence that replaced local traditional values, she also valued new perspectives and talents she gained while abroad. She attributes her emphasis on self-starting—finding new solutions to problems when they arise as due to the influence of her education and her time in the United States (125).

That long-term, deep, and widespread change comes at a cost to the individual is something Maathai knows through personal experience. Regarding *Unbowed*, Claire Schaeffer-Duffy (2007) comments, "failure and obstacles define her journey," as she bears imprisonment, violent attacks, and divorce during the pursuit of her goals; but these experiences do not derail her because "adversity can clarify and strengthen commitment." In Maathai's own words, "A stumble is only one step in the long path we walk and dwelling on it only postpones the completion of our journey" (2007, 162).

Maathai's experience is relevant when empowerment happens in a context of resistance (Allen 1998, 34).

Women's empowerment groups emphasize that by joining together, women can change their world for the better. Participating in electoral politics is just one way, and not the only or best way, of becoming politically active. Anytime people come together for concerted action to change their world is an example of "political action" in the broad sense.

Maathai explains that much of her life was involved in civil society and voluntary associations like the GBM, and she worked in cooperation with NGOs (for example, the Norwegian Forestry Society) that funded environmental projects. Maathai formulated an easy-to-follow ten-step process for starting a GBM group. Importantly, recruiting others to start additional GBM groups/projects was an important step for each group. The enthusiasm was infectious. She explains that "this was a breakthrough because it was now communities empowering one another . . . the process replicated itself several thousand times" (2007, 137). They did not wait for government to fix things.

Nixon sees Maathai's movement in the larger context of civil society. He thinks that many disaffected constituencies in Kenya, including students and others feeling marginalized, joined her group not due to environmental concerns per se but because they appreciated her emphasis on activism and they wanted to be part of her "dramatic initiative to repossess for the polity not just plundered public land and resources but also plundered political agency" (ibid., 22). Clearly Maathai cannot be considered *merely* an environmentalist, since she taught, through demonstration, self and group empowerment techniques that could be used to address a host of societal problems.



Taking into consideration Maathai's contributions as a role model and author, what conclusions can we draw regarding empowerment and its relationship to self esteem, community activism, and political action? As we saw earlier, according to Lewis, "empowerment" is one of those terms often used lately to mean, in a shallow sense, "success" in terms accepted by the status quo. Maathai's understanding and use of "empowerment" did not conform to the status quo in Kenya, but changed the existing framework in many ways. For example, she challenged current understandings of women's role (in leadership/politics), as well as environmental values (rather than reducing everything to cash value). She dared to criticize those who wanted God or the government to rescue them, and encouraged and demonstrated women coming together to make changes in their communities and country in conformity with their values. Her challenges to the status quo did not entail simplistically jettisoning the past for an uncharted future (or for copying foreign ideas); she carefully rescued important but neglected values from the past and championed them anew, while at the same time, in other areas, creatively modeling new practices and mindsets.

### **Maathai's participation in electoral politics and political protest**

Aili Mari Tripp explains that the 1990s brought new opportunities for women in Africa to engage in politics. She explains that women's extensive experience in associations such as churches, savings clubs, community improvement associations and non-governmental organizations helped to prepare them for political work. Tripp also notes that once they entered politics, women were fierce opponents of the corruption, patronage, and ethnic division they found in the existing political systems. She mentions both Wangari Maathai and Charity Ngilu (a Minister of Parliament who also ran in

Presidential elections in 1997) as key Kenyan examples of this larger trend in Africa (Tripp, 2004, 144, 151-52).

In a majority of countries around the world, including Kenya, women struggle to be adequately represented in electoral politics. In 1982 Maathai attempted to run in a by-election for a seat in Parliament. At this time, there were only two women seated in parliament (Maathai, 2007, 159-160) and the bias against women in politics was high. In fact, the courts disqualified Maathai from running due to a technicality (the government claimed she should have re-registered to vote). Then, to add insult to injury, the University of Nairobi, which had earlier insisted that she resign in order to stand for election, refused to reinstate her when she was found ineligible to run (2007, 160-63).

Many years later, she tried again to enter electoral politics. Maathai admits she entered the November 1997 election only five weeks before election day, and that she had little funds for her campaign. She says that she chose to run for a parliamentary seat in Tetu constituency (which includes her birthplace) as well as campaigning for the Presidency, in order to have access to dialogues with other candidates so as to encourage opposition candidates to maintain a united front against KANU, the ruling party. She became one of fifteen presidential candidates. But she was accused of being a “spoiler” for the campaign of the one other woman Presidential candidate, Charity Ngilu, who already held a parliamentary seat. The press printed a rumor on election day saying she had dropped out and endorsed another candidate. She concluded in retrospect in her memoir that she had been a “dreamer” to have thought that voters could transcend the local political culture and vote for the best qualified candidates (2007, 256–59).

The sexist views of male Kenyan politicians posed constant challenges for Maathai. Nancy Worthington (2003) notes that media coverage of politically active

women tends to portray women as unnecessarily aggressive and ill-equipped to lead. Reviewing media coverage of Maathai's 1989–1990 campaign to stop the business development project proposed for Uhuru Park, Worthington notes three phases in the media coverage. In an early phase, news media acknowledged Maathai's stature as an expert, quoted her directly, and attributed authority to her words, even when she questioned a government minister (149). But this changed once President Moi spoke out against Maathai's criticisms of his development project. Moi invoked gender to explain his outrage at Maathai's opposition, saying she "shows no respect for men as required by African traditions" (157). The press even quoted Moi's incredulity that the GBM planted any trees (*ibid.*). Moi challenged women, saying, "Can't you discipline one of your own?" (Cesar, 132–33). Moi's statements were repeated with great deference. In the third phase, Maathai was being called "indomitable," then "obstinate" and "desperate." When she was persecuted for her views, she was accused of having brought down the wrath of the authorities upon her. Her actions were portrayed as "a lonely fight" despite the fact that her position had broad support (Worthington, 155–57).

Such attacks did not deter Maathai from protesting. Dana Cesar (2010) points to Maathai's dramatization of reclaiming public lands such as the Karura Forest that had been distributed to private individuals by President Moi in a system of rewards for favors rendered. Only 2 percent of Kenya was forested, so Maathai engaged in "guerrilla" reforestation of public lands (128) and through this publicity, worked to stop public land allocations. Ellen Gorsevski explores the importance of the choices of symbolic expression, such as women sneaking into the Karurua Forest (accompanied by the press) "armed" with a "watering can" to engage in their nonviolent resistance (9). Rob Nixon (2006–2007) considers the short-sighted pillage of Kenya's natural resources as possible due to male-dominated politics in Kenya. He contrasts Maathai's

slow, intergenerational focus on trees and the future with current emphases on making a quick buck. He notes that Kenya's booming economy is filled with increasing polarity between the rich and the poor (20–23, 25, 30–31).

Maathai finally won a parliamentary seat in 2002. Her campaign slogan was “Rise up and walk!” (287), which alluded to the Bible passage in Acts 3:1–10. Maathai explains that the passage is about apostles Peter and John encountering a lame beggar “who has all the characteristics of a disempowered person: he is poor, self-effacing, dejected, and has no sense of pride in himself” (287). But Peter encourages him to rise and walk, and he can do it. According to Maathai, the moral of the story was that “together, we could lift ourselves up and address the conditions of our poverty and disempowerment and regain our self-respect” (287). So even when campaigning for office, her message was a broader one, of encouraging Kenyans to have the confidence and fortitude to change their country for the better.

Maathai's efforts finally bore fruit. In 2003, at a time when few women held ministerial positions in Kenya, Maathai was appointed Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources, a post in which she served until 2005.

Maathai could be seen as a trailblazer regarding her early entry into electoral politics. Kenya has been going through rapid changes regarding women's participation in electoral politics. For most decades since Independence in 1963 up to just a few years ago, women held ten percent or less of electoral and appointed positions in government. But many countries in Africa have gone through rapid change in the past decades, often with the help of affirmative action quotas for women. With the help of such quotas, neighbouring countries Tanzania and Uganda rank 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> internationally for rates of women's participation in national parliaments, while Kenya ranks 76<sup>th</sup> and the United States ranks 78<sup>th</sup> (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2013). Seeing and wishing to copy

such gains, Article 27, point 8 of the new Kenyan Constitution (2010) stipulates that no more than 2/3 of elected and appointed representatives can be of one gender. Despite this constitutional requirement, there were not enough women candidates running in the 2013 elections to be able to fulfill that mandate. The Kenyan Supreme Court ruled that the 1/3 gender requirement would not apply to the 2013 elections, but should be implemented progressively (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2013, 15). Maria Nzomo has argued that without attention to campaign finance reform, and without a change in the perceptions of Kenyan voters, women will continue to be at a disadvantage in elections (Nzomo, 2012). Women politicians considered to be outspoken still face backlash from men, as illustrated by the recent case of Governor Evans Kidero slapping Nairobi women representative Rachel Shebesh at Nairobi City Hall in September 2013 (Michira, 2013). Still, milestones reached in 2013 include six out of 18 members of the Cabinet being women, including Amina Mohamed as the first woman Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Rayechelle Omamo as the first woman Minister of Defence (Rotich, 2013).

### **Education: What kind of education engenders empowerment?**

Contemporary campaigns such as Girl Rising (2012) and Girl Up (2013) try to reach audiences in the United States by suggesting that the solution for the problems of poverty and violence against women in Africa and many parts of Asia is to focus on educating girls. By education, they mean having girls attend school. Recently, focusing on the brutal murder attempt of Malala Yousufzai, a Pakistani girl who insisted on attending school, which gained wide media attention, organizations such as UNESCO (2012) and UNICEF (2013) are using the spotlight created by the media to reinforce the idea that girls' education is a priority. Rarely do any of the groups raise the question of

the *kind* of schooling the girls will receive. It is presumed they will learn literacy and job skills. Girl Rising, (2012) drawing upon a World Bank working paper by Jad Chabaan and Wendy Cunningham (2011), argues that a girl who receives an extra year of education will make 20 percent a year more income as an adult. The study, which surveys fourteen countries in Asia and Africa, including the three East African countries we are focusing upon, claims that investing in girl's education will raise the country's Gross Domestic Product significantly.

No doubt schooling for girls is an important goal, but the arguments made in support of it have usually been made within the capitalist framework, promising increased income for girls and improvement of the country's economy. Each use of the word "empowerment" in the World Bank study specifically mentions boosting girl's/women's earning power, and not any other possible aspects of empowerment.

Perhaps we should pay attention to the kind of schooling we are advocating. As Jay Drydyk (this volume) explains, the presence of any particular means to empowerment, such as literacy or education, cannot in itself be directly interpreted as generating empowerment *simpliciter*. While education is no doubt a good thing, women need educational skills in a range of methods for social expression and agency, to not just fit into the status quo system, but to challenge and change it, for a fuller expression of empowerment.

The statements made above must not be construed to suggest that girls' formal education is unimportant. In Jane Osongo's study she found that in Kenya, unequal division of household chores begins during childhood for girls, when many are not able to concentrate on their education due to their workload (Osongo 2011, 27). It would indeed be an important project for Kenyan parents to learn to prioritize their daughters' school attendance, or at least ensure that they attend on par with the sons in the family.

Maathai herself had an extensive formal education, more than most Kenyan women were able to achieve, and yet in her work with GBM, she realized that she had to change her mind about what kind and methods of education women needed most. She explained that having women learn forestry from male experts was counter-productive. The men would use complicated jargon and describe procedures that depended on expensive machinery. Maathai realized that women among themselves had the environmental knowledge they needed to succeed. After all, they were farmers, with loads of practical experience, all of which was being discounted by professional foresters. She concluded that women could teach each other (2007, 135–36).

Anke Wolbert (2011) argues that Maathai used critical pedagogical principles akin to what Paulo Freire called the “conscientization process.” Women learned from each other to demystify oppressive structures and to exercise courage to challenge the social order (95–104). Her side-stepping around stultifying formal education is something that Mechthild Nagel (2005) sees as an example of what Patricia Hill Collins calls “wisdom” in the Afrocentric feminist epistemology (4). This educational maneuver was matched, according to Rob Nixon, by Maathai’s rejection of masculinist ideas of saving the environment, a paradigm that removed all humans in its quest to protect non-human nature. Instead, Maathai defined environment as the place of women farmers with their deeply grounded knowledge of ecology and agriculture (2006–2007, 24).

In an epilogue to *Unbowed*, written after she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, Maathai announced that she was going to create an empowerment center in Nairobi that would offer experiential learning opportunities as well as civic and environmental education, as she believed this to be the kind of education most important for a woman’s life (2007, 305). Since her death in September 2011, the GBM

continues to offer three- to four-day seminars in community empowerment (see <http://www.GreenBeltmovement.org/what-we-do/community-empowerment>).

Maathai did not completely discount higher formal education, but she did want the current education system to be radically changed. While academic institutions may prepare professionals to write journal articles, Maathai thought that their students often display insensitive behavior toward rural communities suffering dire problems. And an academically trained student has simply not been prepared to tackle the real life problems of abject poverty and under-development.

The University of Nairobi now houses the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies. The Institute's mission is to address the problem of academic institutions' failures to translate environmental knowledge into concrete help to Kenya's rural people. It follows up on Maathai's recommendation to focus on ethics and values, instilling character traits such as earnest work, respect for others, gratitude for the earth's gifts, and responsibility to work for the common good (<http://wmi.uonbi.ac.ke/node/3991>).

Emphasis on having young women participate in existing structures of formal education was criticized as misplaced by Elinami Veraeli Swai, a Tanzanian scholar who recently earned her PhD in Education at Pennsylvania State University, and now teaches Women's and Gender Studies at University of Toledo, Ohio. Swai (2010) argues that in Tanzania, the term "empowerment" has been used in a narrow sense to describe the process of formal education and professionalization of women, which she considers to bring unexpected unhappiness to many women in rural Tanzania, as they find themselves misfits in their communities and cope with difficulties in finding a marriage partner and raising children. A main drawback to pursuing education, from her perspective, is the marginalization of women's knowledge that already exists outside of



formal education. Women who provide food security for their families as well as care for family members in need, or who can practice medicine, in some cases curing infection, food poisoning, and snake bite, for example, are considered less important than the formally educated (at best) or are deprecated as heathens (at worst). As a particularly vivid example of the suppression of women's knowledge, Swai recounts her interview with a woman who remembered her grandmother who, under pressure from the local missionary, had three of her fingers cut off to deter her from continuing her healing practice, which the missionary insisted was against Christianity (126–136).

What is the ideal way for educated women to work with rural women? Maathai designed the GBM to work with rural women, and insisted that in her group, educated (including herself) and rural women worked side-by-side. But she notes that politicians have exploited the urban-rural distinction to divide women. Maathai's early work with forestry had been part of the work of the National Council for Women in Kenya (NCWK). One of the many other groups affiliated with NCWK was Maendeleo ya Wanawake (meaning Progress for Women). According to Maathai, when the Kenyan government wanted to oppose her efforts, they used their political connections to Maendeleo, having the group's leaders charge that NCWK was run by educated, urban women who marginalized rural women. The members of Maendeleo therefore left NCWK and the government continued to financially support Maendeleo, leaving NCWK almost bankrupt (until it found foreign donors) (2007, 137–38, 155–56).

Maathai wants her readers to be able to distinguish between a real urban-rural split and one manufactured for political reasons. Researchers in Kenya have observed how politicians often try to manipulate rural women, even trying to buy their votes with bags of sugar and other staples (Abwunza, 1997, 115–118). From the perspective of politicians trying to maintain status quo power, encouraging a social rift between urban

and rural women may be a divide and conquer tactic that purposely disempowers women. However, Swai still has a point well taken. Urban or educated women who are not self-aware of how their attitudes may prejudice them against rural women (who do not have a formal education like themselves) could in fact be alienating rural women.

Swai judges that construing empowerment as formal education usually strengthens “a patriarchal and capitalist agenda,” since rather than create an alternative to the status quo, it rather merely encourages women to succeed in the current status quo (7).<sup>2</sup> Judith Abwunza (1997) explains how women’s groups, ostensibly created by drawing upon traditional sentiments of solidarity with others (*silica* in Swahili) often end up reinforcing capitalism. In her study of women’s groups in Maragoli, in the Western Province in Kenya, she notes that the groups’ activities are “pervaded by a capitalistic ideology of progress and accumulation of wealth” (158). But since it “takes money to make money” (158), and since poor women often don’t have their own start-up funds, groups often stagnate unless they receive start-up loans from outside sources.

Swai has encountered many women’s “empowerment” groups in Tanzania that are led by educated middle class African women, whom Swai thinks cannot relate to rural women as equals, since they are convinced that due to their education they are superior to other women. These attitudes alienate rural women. Swai also notes that there are sometimes monetary requirements for being able to join these mutual aid groups, and while the amounts of money involved may seem nominal to outsiders, they are prohibitive for many rural women (ibid., 162–165).

### **Cultural traditions and their relationship to colonial history and capitalism**

Maathai says that upon returning to Kenya after pursuing education abroad, she considered herself entirely Westernized, even at home with her family. It was only through her work with rural women in the GBM that she realized her need to connect to

her own cultural roots. This revelation stemmed from her insight that when traditional cultures are destroyed by Westernism, Africans are left with the “gods of commercialism, materialism, and individualism,” that leave both stomachs and souls empty (2009, 164).

Many Kenyan communities had traditions that respected nature. In Brendon Nicholls’ study (2005) of the so-called Mau Mau—insurgents who fought against the British during colonialism—he found that Gikuyu elders (Maathai’s ethnic group) would talk to the fighters about their sacred relationship to the forest. He said:

These elders invested the landscape with spiritual significance, in which the slightest human action (such as cutting down trees, killing animals needlessly or shooting towards mountains in which spirits dwelled) interacted with a network of taboos and portents and could invoke adverse meteorological, military or even cosmological consequences. (185)

Such a system of taboos could reinforce respect for nature.

An important aspect of cultural traditions has been story telling. Maathai herself became a storyteller, practicing this oral art in many of her public appearances. Her storytelling ability was highlighted and illustrated in animation as part of a film called “Dirt: The Movie.” In this documentary about environmental challenges caused by contemporary agriculture techniques, Maathai tells the story of a hummingbird who, while very small, does all it can to stop a forest fire, while the other larger animals stand by, paralyzed by the sight of the big blaze (Rosow and Benenson, 2009). And the fact that she tells the story in the context of an American-made documentary on the environment, with the larger world as her audience, shows that such stories not only reach Kenyans of all ages, but are indeed accessible (and memorable) to many people worldwide.

Maathai is not the only one of her generation to use oral storytelling as an educational tool based in Africa’s traditions. Currently across Africa, oral literature,

including proverbs and tales, is incorporated into the curriculum of schools from primary to tertiary education. Folk tales have practical advice and moral guidance. While they can be studied as literature, their value is more than mere artistry. They can serve as guides to life as well as encouragement. They are important educational tools that provide not just knowledge as in information, but also help to reinforce identity and purpose in life. In the Kenyan context it was Kenyan faculty at the University of Nairobi who played a key role in making the curriculum (which up to this point had been based on British models) more inclusive of African literature and history. Taban lo Liyong and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as well as Okot p'Bitek, were some of the key proponents of this new African-centered approach in the 1970s (Ogot, 1995, 217-220, 230). When Maathai uses storytelling, she can reach out simultaneously to young and old Kenyans. In this way her message is not limited to the audience of school attendees but can spread more easily throughout the entire society.

In workshops Maathai conducted for women, participants often referred to loss of traditional cultures as contributing to contemporary problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, theft, and school dropouts. This led Maathai to emphasize the need for self-knowledge (*kwimenya* in Kikuyu) (2010, 169–170). Some of the traditional knowledge that protected the environment has already been lost (167). Maathai admits that it is not possible or desirable to turn back the hands of time to return to an African past, but it is important to try to view the past through eyes other than the colonizer's (182–183). As well, she does not want to return to a patriarchal society, but wants instead a genuine partnership that respects gender equity and involves both parents in raising children (278).

“Cultural roots” not only involve spiritual beliefs and practices; there are also cultural traditions of family and economic organization. Some of those traditions have

been destroyed during colonial times. In *The Challenge for Africa* (2009), Maathai notes that in Kenya, practices of labor migration reinforced during colonialism have separated men from their families. Fathers who are absent from rural areas leave children vulnerable. Women often find themselves raising families alone, and single heads of households are prevalent, with women even giving last names to their children (276–277). Much of the suffering of East African women has to do with poverty that has historical, political, and economic causes. So it would be erroneous to think that East African women’s suffering is mostly due to their husbands (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 18). Maathai commented that traditionally, land in Kenya was held by a family; only during colonial times would there be a title deed for property that would only be given to men (Maathai 2009, 227). Nixon points out the ways in which colonial theft, the “masculinizing of property,” the focus on cash crops and the resulting environmental degradation have made rural African women farmers’ lives harder (2006–2007, 25). Adding to the complexity of the anti-colonial narrative, a Kenyan woman researcher found that Maragoli widows thought life was easier for them under colonialism. This imperial nostalgia is due to disillusionment with politics in the context of postcolonial Kenya (Mutongi, 2007).

There are African women scholars who have argued that women have not always been oppressed and that African understandings of relations between the sexes has been different than Euro-American conceptions. They have decried Northern feminist scholars’ presumption that Africans have the same ideas of gender subordination found in Europe and the United States (Oyěwùmi, 2003, 2003b; Okome, 2003; Kolawole, 2006). One key theme of their comments is that in the African context motherhood is more important than wifhood, and so a focus on the latter issue is Eurocentric. Also, focusing on wifhood neglects multiple identities and statuses that

women hold in large extended families, narrowing concepts of their status to the relation to the husband (Nzegwu, 2004). Many of the scholars who criticize Euro-American gender theorists come from West Africa, but their ideas might apply to some East African communities as well.

The almost exclusive focus on “wifehood” decried above can be seen in the coverage of the topic “empowerment” in the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (2008). All surveys on topics in this section of the report have to do with women’s decision making power vis-à-vis her husband. While the results can be fascinating, the choice of focus shows that the concept of empowerment is too limited and too greatly influenced by Euro-American studies that focus on the nuclear family. In a study that draws upon data of the 2008 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey but uses latent class analysis, sociologist John Musalia says that respondents to the questions on women’s empowerment can be categorized in four ways, as holding pragmatic, traditionalist, egalitarian, or independent positions. A significant number of Kenyan women, and especially a large percentage of women who head households, hold an independent position in which they think that they do not need to consult men when they are making decisions (Musalia, 2013).

One could add that among those women who do not want to consult men would be included the women who opt for traditions of woman-woman marriage, that can still be found in contemporary Kenya, including in Wangari Maathai’s home area in Central Province. Gikuyu and Nandi “*muhikania*” (woman-woman) marriages give women rights to land and to become the heads of their lineage, an option that was not possible in Christian patriarchal marriages (Njambi and O’Brien, 2005). Recent Kenyan courts have upheld the right of women to own and pass property to their heirs, based on *muhikania* traditions (Mwobobia, 2011). Interestingly enough, the Kenya Demographic

and Health Survey (2008, 236) shows Central Province to be the most likely to approve of women's decision-making participation. Women's gains since the 2010 Constitution have been expressed by a host of rulings upholding women's rights to inherit property that had been part of their fathers' estates. Significantly, these cases have been decided by several women Justices—Mary Kasango, Martha Koome, and Kalpana Rawal (Wambugu 2011).

Wangari Maathai has become a role model for Kenyan women who want to express themselves rather than live a life subordinate to their husbands. This ability to chart one's own course in life rather than follow the dictates of a husband is one of many senses of empowerment that Maathai discusses and models through her actions, although, unlike the demographic report, it is not the only way in which she expresses women's empowerment.

Men experience a lot of pressure to be seen by others to be in charge in the household. Maathai admits that she underestimated this problem within her own marriage: "Nobody warned me—and it had never occurred to me—that in order for us to survive as a couple I should fake failure and deny any of my God-given talents" (2007, 140). Not only African traditions but also British colonial traditions favor men's power. Maathai wrote that she saw the early stages of the unraveling of her marriage as she was pressured by her husband to take his surname, Mathai, when African traditions would have named her for her father or her own children (2007, 140).

When Maathai's husband, a successful Minister of Parliament, decided to divorce her, the British court traditions made things difficult. At that time, Kenyan law granted divorce only for cruelty, adultery, mental torture, or insanity. Accordingly, her husband accused her of cruelty and adultery based on hearsay. Maathai (who changed the spelling of her last name after the divorce, when her then ex-husband insisted she

could no longer use his name) not only lost her case, but was jailed for six months for contempt of court after “slandering” a judge, because she opined to a reporter that the judge must have not used reasonable standards in his decision.

In her memoirs, Maathai expressed happiness that the laws regarding divorce have changed from the British model to spare couples from similar embarrassing and harmful legal procedures (ibid., 140, 148). While she was shocked to realize that she could not only be divorced by the courts but also thrown in jail (all for daring to speak her mind as a woman), she saw this, the first of her many incarcerations, to be a time that strengthened her inner resolve. Maathai, through personal example, shows women that they can have meaningful lives and feelings of connection and community with each other, and with nature and the earth, without depending on men, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why so many people identify her as a feminist – at least, she was considered to be one by the many mainstream and feminist publications and websites that wrote about her after her winning the Nobel Prize, and also in eulogies written at the time of her death.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, Maathai and other Kenyan thinkers have expanded the meaning of “empowerment” beyond the narrow or shallow uses of the term that signify only the ability to obtain formal schooling for career and economic advancement. The reader is asked to recall the deeper meaning of the term “empowerment” drawn from Ibrahim and Alkire’s inventory of the word’s use, where the term meant developing a person’s insight into social and structural inhibitors of flourishing, so that the person can change their individual perspectives and actions, and join in community with others, to change their context so that they can more easily achieve well-being.



Having learned about Maathai's form of civic education for empowerment, and seeing it actualized by the political actions of members of the GBM to reform their society, we see the term "empowerment" taking on a deeper meaning. This is not education for "success" in a narrow understanding. Rather, it involves searching for one's community traditions and cultural roots in order to ground oneself in a firm context of values that can withstand the temptations to forget the value of nature and hold a profit motive as the highest priority. It means building on the aspects of tradition that give women significant roles of responsibility as well as giving them liberty, while resisting traditions that bestow upon men the privilege of making life decisions for women. It also means joining with each other and accomplishing much, through a multiplier effect, as women's movements grow to the point, for example, of planting millions of trees. It also means changing our institutions to ensure women's greater participation. It means paying attention to courageous women role models from East Africa.

One might think that one understands a concept, but the understanding might be abstract. To test understanding, ask whether you can recognize the concept at work. Can you notice if it's absent? White male philosophers of earlier days thought they understood the concept and the value "equality," but apparently failed to notice the aspects of their society that were unequal and unfair. We still have that narrow view. But, our view can be widened by learning from Maathai and others, who can see empowerment where once we could not see it (in some African traditions regarding women), and notice where it is being taken away or hindered (in Kenyan politics, during colonialism, or in certain practices of religion). At the end of this learning experience, we no longer have the same concept of empowerment; we have a fuller, richer understanding of it.

In closing, it seems appropriate to reiterate one final time that Wangari Maathai and other women's empowerment theorists from East Africa have much to teach on theoretical and practical levels. The authors discussed herein are accomplished writers, activists, teachers, and deep thinkers. They have access to complex customs and histories and the confidence of many who confide in them, so that they can really know what people in their respective countries think about certain topics and practices, and what they want for the future of East Africa. Also, they pinpoint problems that are experienced by women in contexts beyond Africa. It would behoove us to listen closely, and to read and study their works, both to learn more about them, and to ask better and deeper questions about our own societies and our experiences.

### **Notes on Contributors**

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### **Notes**

1. Nixon suggests that courses should cover “figures like Wangari Maathai, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdul Rahman Munif, Njabulo S. Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica

Kincaid, Arundhati Roy, and June Jordan [who] have recorded the long-term inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, the practice of shipping rich nations' toxins (like e-waste) to poor nations' dumping grounds, tourism that threatens indigenous peoples, conservation practices that drive people off their historic lands, environmental deregulation for commercial or military demands, and much more" (2011). He also suggests the following anthologies: Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011); Alex Hunt and Bonnie Roos, *Postcolonial Green* (2010); Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, *Environment at the Margins*.

2. In the South African context, Nigel Gibson critiques Thabo Mbeki's advocacy of "black economic empowerment" (2005, 93). In 1999, Mbeki encouraged Black South Africans to overcome their inferiority complexes and become "prosperous" and begin to grow a "black bourgeoisie" (quoted in *ibid.*). Gibson considers this an example of what Frantz Fanon called "social treason," involving a "nauseating mimicry" of white colonial masters, in which (in contrast to African values) "being" is reduced to "having" (*ibid.*).

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