Since its inception, feminism has achieved some societal changes through sharing experiences, developing theory and campaigning for rights such as, for example, phasing out discriminatory laws by seeking women’s equality, reduced male dominance in the family institutions, increased participation of women in clergy, use of gender neutral language and increased participation of women in decision making organs.

The conference on Pathways to Feminism and Development in Africa took place at a momentous period of time, that was when The African Women’s Studies Centre had just been approved by the University of Nairobi Council, and more so, when the implementation of the new Constitution of Kenya giving women a fair share of representation in Parliament had just started, after a long struggle, and women were beginning to see the fruits of their struggle. That was a time when women at every level were getting sensitized to participate in all socio-political and economic activities for development, since they too, have the potential and the Constitution has provided the necessary conditions for their growth and development.

The Conference brought together scholars from different Kenyan Universities to share their views on feminism and development and was held on 30th June 2011 at the University of Nairobi, Main Campus, Council Chambers. The aim of the conference was to enable the scholars to come together and share various pathways to feminism and development in Africa. The key officials included Deputy Chief Justice, Lady Justice Nancy Barasa; Dr. Risper Oduor who represented the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology; Professor Enos Njeru, Principal College of Humanities and Social Sciences representing the Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, and Professor Odek, Dean Faculty of Law. The facilitators included the African Women’s Studies Centre (AWSC) representatives drawn from the various Colleges of the University of Nairobi linked to the Centre. Among those present was Prof. Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira who is the Director of the Centre. The others included Dr. Jesang Hutchinson who is the coordinator in the College of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences, Dr. Siphila Mumenya from the College of Architecture and Engineering, Professor Octavian Gakuru from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ms. Mabel Isolio from the Institute of Anthropology and Gender Studies and Anna Petkova-Mwangi from the College of Education and External Studies.

The methodology employed involved presentation of papers on various thematic areas based on feminism and development. Each presentation was followed by a discussion by an assigned scholar highlighting key concerns in the presentation. After a couple of presentations, there were plenary discussions where the participants gave their views in light of the presentations. It was noted that the African woman has been gagged for a very long time and it was high time that she spoke out and was heard. This has been because of culture that has portrayed women as inadequate beings, the existence of male brokers whom women have to negotiate through for power, illiteracy, diversity which has fractured women’s unity, a question of tactics and strategy, and denial of identity.
It was also observed that overtime; women had been retrogressing, especially when they met with resistance. It was realized that investing in women is investing in the development of all spheres of a nation. When a woman is empowered the benefits trickle down to the family level. Thus women movements should be strengthened despite the diversities of women and strong linkages should be built with the women at the grassroots level. The dominant hindrances for the development of the African woman were noted to be lack of economic power and development, real or perceived traditional practices based on the patriarchal model, scarcity of resources and competition, the plural system of law which allows for the practice of religious, customary and state law that do not have the interests of the woman in mind, the role of theory in the portrayal of women and the women’s voice which is not affirming who the women are. To achieve development, feminism needs to be integrated in all socio-political and economic sectors of the state. The papers discussed at the Pathways to Development forum form the first issue of the Centre Journal. Prof. Patricia Kameri-Mbote is the editor of the African Women Studies Journal.