One Person, One Tree: Wangari Maathai and Ecofeminism in the Greenbelt Movement

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Abstract: In 1989, Professor Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmental activist, was approached with a potentially explosive issue regarding the environmental preservation of Uhuru Park, an important greenspace in the heart of Nairobi, Kenya. The Kenyan government, along with British investors, had plans to build a sixty-story skyscraper that would cast a literal shadow over the park. The construction project, supported by the President of Kenya and the government, would encroach on Uhuru Park, further shrinking the greenspace. As the leader and founder of the Green Belt Movement, a Kenyan grassroots organization focused on environmental restoration and recovery, Maathai had to grapple with whether she should speak out against the construction of the skyscraper and subsequently incur the wrath of Kenya's autocratic, patriarchal government or stay silent to avoid the social and political backlash that would be sure to follow if she opposed the construction. This case study examines Maathai's ecofeminist approach to environmental activism and leadership while she faced the obstacles of working in a society that openly opposed women's leadership and participation in the public sphere of society.

Introduction

In the fall of 1989, as Professor Wangari Maathai worked late in her office at the University of Nairobi, a law student came to her door with pressing news. The student had just learned of the Kenyan government's plans to build a skyscraper in Uhuru Park, a greenspace located to the west of Uhuru highway (Maathai 2008). Uhuru Park is well-known by denizens of Nairobi as the ecological heart of the city, comparable to Central Park in New York City or Hyde Park in London (Maathai 2008). Uhuru Park offers a bevy of attractions centered around the use of outdoor spaces. The trees lining the park allow for all groups of people, old or young, wealthy or poor, to escape from the city and take a breath of fresh air. Its lawns, pathways, and boating lake allow residents to come out and enjoy the natural environment amidst the bustling city (Maathai 2008). While other greenspaces existed around the city, none were as large and as central as Uhuru Park.

Over the previous decades, Maathai and other residents had watched as the city encroached further and further into the park as more roads and buildings were constructed. In 1988, the government even built a monument to celebrate the current President Daniel Moi who was appointed just a decade earlier (Maathai 2008). However, none of the previous changes to the metropolitan area surrounding the greenspace were as invasive as the sixty-story British-designed and part British-owned skyscraper that President Moi's government planned to build, which would cast a literal shadow over the park (Hiltzik 1989). The complex would include a world trade center and stock exchange, along with offices, banks, malls, and conference facilities (Earth Island

Journal 1990). When the project was first unveiled to the public, it was dubbed "trendy and magnificent…the most prestigious in the whole of black Africa" (Hiltzik 1989, n.p.). Maathai was shocked to hear of the plans to construct such a large intrusion into the park, one of Kenya's largest green belts.

The student came to Maathai in confidence, knowing that any anti-government rhetoric surfacing would lead to arrest and detainment by the Kenyan Government (Maathai 2008). President Moi and his ruling party, for most of the years of his presidency, had unwavering authority over Kenya's political and judicial systems (McFadden 2020). In 1982, President Moi had finally succeeded in making Kenya a *de jure* (by right) one-party state, giving his party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), absolute power (McFadden 2020). President Moi and the Kenyan government maintained their authority by committing a number of human rights abuses against citizens of Kenya who sought political change. These abuses included detaining, torturing, or even killing those who spoke out against his regime (McFadden 2020). Moi's government was also known for suppressing and controlling Kenya's media. Those who spoke out against President Moi and his party faced the consequences of being at the mercy of an autocratic state.

Coupled with the plans to build the skyscraper, the student also revealed to Maathai that a statue of President Moi would be constructed outside the new complex (Maathai 2008). Earlier that same year, President Moi made a name for himself as an environmentalist when he set fire to twelve tons of ivory in an effort to bring the world's attention to ending the ivory trade, which had reduced the elephant populations across Kenya (Perlez 1989). The ivory trade is fueled by poaching, a huge concern to environmentalists across the world. In a statement regarding the event, President Moi said: "To stop the poacher, the trader must be also be stopped and to stop the trader, the final buyer must be convinced not to buy ivory…I appeal to people all over the world to stop buying ivory" (Perlez 1989, n.p.). President Moi's newfound image as an environmentalist on the world stage would be tarnished if Maathai were to stand against the construction of the skyscraper, a project supported and popularized by President Moi.

In the following weeks Maathai was faced with a decision. Should she speak out against the planned construction project in Uhuru Park for intruding into one of Kenya's largest green belts? As an environmental activist, Maathai not only had to face the Kenyan government in her pursuit to protect Uhuru Park, but she also had to navigate her role as a high achieving, non-traditional woman at the forefront of an environmental movement in a country that was unsupportive of female progress.

Wangari Maathai's Younger Years

Wangari Maathai was born on April 1, 1940 and grew up in rural Nyeri County in the central highlands of Kenya (Wangari Maathai Foundation 2020). Unlike many girls at the time who were not sent to school, Maathai pursued primary and secondary education in Kenya before leaving for the United States to attend college on a scholarship (Wangari Maathai Foundation 2020). In the United States, Maathai expanded her learning in the sciences and took courses in rural development where she learned strategies that she would later employ in her environmental activism efforts (Florence 2017). Maathai later returned to Kenya with a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences from Mount St. Scholastica College and a Master's in Biological Sciences from the University of Pittsburg in 1966 (Wangari Maathai Foundation 2020).

In April of the same year, Maathai met her husband, Mwangi Mathai, through mutual friends (Maathai 2008). The two would later wed in May 1969. Mwangi was a religious man who

grew up in the agricultural town of Njoro. He studied in the United States, much like Maathai, and worked in various business corporations in Kenya before entering local politics and then the Kenyan Parliament (Maathai 2008). Despite Maathai feeling more at home in academia, Mwangi introduced her to the business world, a move that would later be crucial in the formation of her own grassroots organization (Maathai 2008). Maathai had three children with Mwangi throughout their marriage: Waweru, Wanjira, and Muta (The Green Belt Movement 2021).

Maathai continued to pursue her education, studying veterinary anatomy at the University of Nairobi and graduating in 1971 to become the first woman in East Africa to earn a doctorate (Wangari Maathai Foundation 2020). She began her teaching career in veterinary anatomy at the same university, eventually becoming the first woman in the region to chair a university department in 1976 (Wangari Maathai Foundation 2020). Maathai's high achievements in education served as a source of friction in her life:

> I was also facing the challenging [*sic*] of venturing into what was considered a man's world. . . But Kenyan society idolizes education and considers it a panacea for all other problems. Traditionally, society puts more value on boys than on girls: Boys are provided education before girls and boys are expected to be greater achievers than girls. Therefore, it was an unspoken problem that I and not my husband had a Ph.D. and taught at the university (Florence 2017, 50).

Maathai's journey through academia challenged many Kenyan societal expectations for women at the time.

Wangari's Introduction to Environmental Organizations

In the 1970's, in addition to her work at the university, Maathai participated in multiple civic organizations across Kenya. Many of these organizations, including the Kenya Red Cross of which she became director of in 1973 and the Kenya Association of University Women, were founded by the British and almost fully staffed by the white wives of colonial officials (Maathai 2008). As Kenyan independence gradually took hold, a growing number of the positions were filled by Africans, slowly shifting the leadership dynamics (Maathai 2008). Educated Kenyan women such as Maathai were often asked to volunteer their time to these organizations (Maathai 2008). These new opportunities to participate in leadership positions introduced Maathai to many organizations that were active in environmental advocacy and women's work.

In the 1970's, Maathai was invited to join the Environmental Liaison Centre, a group that wanted to ensure the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the environmental work being done by the United Nations Environment Programme, a global advocate for sustainable development (UN Environment 2021). The issues discussed at the Liaison Centre were not foreign to Maathai. In fact, as biology professor and a native to rural Kenya, she often felt she could connect the topics discussed by the organization to her own experiences or the experiences of other Kenyans (Maathai 2008). While Maathai, as a professor, was conducting research in the rural regions of Kenya, she began to notice changes to Kenya's landscape she did not remember seeing when she was growing up (Maathai 2008). Plantations replaced the indigenous forests present in her youth with commercial trees. Much of the land once covered in a variety of native bushes and grasses was barren or seeded with cash crops. Rivers, muddy with silt, flooded down hills and along paths and roads when it rained, a phenomena Maathai would later attribute to soil erosion. (Maathai 2008). These water sources were once clear and provided

the surrounding communities with drinking water. On top of the environmental changes Maathai took note of, the animals she studied and the people she met were malnourished due to the lack of grass and vegetation in their fields (Maathai 2008). The land degradation Maathai was witnessing had deep roots in Kenya's history as a colony of the British Crown.

Environmentalism and Women in Kenya

In contextualizing the modern-day environmental problems of Kenya that Maathai was observing, it is important to understand the impacts of colonialism on the country and its land management practices. Precolonial Kenya was characterized by a large amount of wildlife diversity in which indigenous peoples sustained themselves and the environment for the thousands of years preceding western exploration and colonization. Indigenous forms of land management centered the conservation of ecosystems, so that the many benefits provided by the ecosystem could be preserved for generations to come.

The Maasai, a pastoralist people, have populated Kenya and Tanzania for hundreds of years and make their living off of the land they inhabit (Emmons 1996). The Maasai people are deeply familiar with the ecological processes of the land and have a broad knowledge of the animals and plants in their region (Emmons 1996). The Maasai lived nomadically, frequently moving around families and livestock which also allowed for the long-term land fertility (Emmons 1996). They provide an excellent example of precolonial land management that stems from traditional knowledge of ecological systems. Conservative forms of land and resource management employed by the Maasai are minimally invasive and center around preserving natural resources for the longevity of the landscape and the people inhabiting it.

Land in precolonial Kenya was communally owned and fair allocation of resources was carried out through clan lineage (Muthuki 2006). During the agricultural cycle, both women and men worked in the field and had roles in land management and sustainability. Women, being symbolically linked to earth, fire, and water, were socialized as cultivators and homemakers (Muthuki 2006). They were tasked with food preparation, firewood collection, and the tilling of soil (Muthuki 2006). A woman, in addition to having to tend to her husband and children, was able to farm family land, collect harvests, and sell her produce at markets (Kariuki 2010).

Because the jobs of women centered around resources provided by the surrounding environment, women were directly involved with creating strategies for using limited resources (Muthuki 2006). Kenyan women were also economically empowered by their access to land despite obtaining it through their husband or male family members. Men traditionally took on more public and community leadership roles. Each gender had a different position in society dictated by complex social structures within their specific clan or ethnic community (Muthuki 2006). These social structures were supported by the sustainable use of land for subsistence farming and animal rearing. Without land and the resources provided by it, women would lose their social position as cultivators and homemakers.

The indigenous and long-practiced land management techniques were disrupted by British colonial rule that shunned the cooperation between humans and nature in favor of environmental exploitation in the name of science and development. British colonization was based on a patriarchal and capitalist framework that emphasized the domination of natural processes and resources (Muthuki 2006). Exploitative methods such as plantation and cash crop farming were implemented in Kenya at the expense of the sustainability of natural resources and longevity of indigenous communities (Muthuki 2006). The system of resource domination to benefit white settlers resulted in negative effects being felt by Kenyan rural communities.

The British colonial government did away with communal land by demarcating plots and issuing title deeds to white settlers (Muthuki 2006). Many Kenyans were dispossessed of their community land and denied user rights (Muthuki 2006). These changes in land ownership disproportionately affected rural women who could no longer collect firewood freely because tree plots became privately owned under colonial laws (Muthuki 2006). Previously, there had been no commercialization of firewood or fuel women used for heating the home and cooking.

Additionally, women used to gain access to communal land plots through their husbands under customary land tenure, a system based off community norms that dictates the usage, possession, and transfer of community land (Karanja 1991). The colonial government did not regard tenured land as being individually owned, and the expropriation of land became common practice. Many plots of arable land, once cultivated by women and their families, were seized, divided up, and given to white settlers to benefit the British Crown. Although women had few rights to land before colonization, they now saw their little land security disappear entirely (Karanja 1991). As women lost access to land through their families and clans, they lost their economic independence, becoming more reliant on men to provide for the household (Kariuki 2010).

Today, Kenya faces numerous environmental challenges as a result of destructive land management practices introduced by colonial settlers including deforestation, soil erosion, poaching, desertification, pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, degradation of aquatic ecosystems and resources, droughts, floods, landslides, and invasion of non-native species (UNDP 2021). Many of these problems directly burden rural Kenyan women. Maathai, through her trips across Kenya, saw firsthand how postcolonial land management practices negatively impacted the daily lives of these women.

Maathai Turns Experience into Action

From her collection of experiences, Maathai began to fully understand the extent of environmental degradation in Kenya and its impacts on the people and industries supported by the land. At her home in Nyeri, Maathai also witnessed topsoil accumulation in the rivers she remembered were once clean and clear (Maathai 2008). The land that was formerly covered by trees, grasses, and bushes whose roots maintained the structure of the soil had been cleared and replaced by tea and coffee farms (Maathai 2008). The connection between trees and quality of life was evident to Maathai.

In the early 1970s, Maathai joined the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), an umbrella organization with the purpose of unifying other women's groups in Kenya in both urban and rural areas (Maathai 2008). In one of the seminars she attended, Maathai listened to a researcher talk about malnutrition among children in central Kenya. The central region of Kenya was known to Maathai as being incredibly fertile (Maathai 2008). Nevertheless, many rural farmers felt pressured by cultivation practices introduced during colonization. As a result, they converted their land, once used to feed the people of Kenya, to cash crops that could be sold for higher prices on the international market. Consequently, women were forced to feed their families processed foods that lacked the necessary vitamins, minerals, and proteins (Maathai 2008).

Cooking processed foods required less firewood, an attractive aspect to women in the region because deforestation across Kenya was making firewood a harder material for them to find and collect (Maathai 2008). According to the United Nations, the main causes of deforestation in Kenya are "unregulated charcoal production, logging of indigenous trees, marijuana cultivation, cultivation in the indigenous forest, livestock grazing, quarry landslides and human settlement"

(2012, n.p.). Throughout her youth in rural Kenya, Maathai never experienced the resource depletion these women were facing in their daily lives. Would these women be able to access and transport clean water? Would they be able to find firewood for their families? How could they properly feed and support their families during times of scarcity?

As Maathai continued be an active member of the NCWK and listened to more stories about the problems Kenyan women, especially poorer rural women, faced, she came to a conclusion: everything the women lacked depended on the environment and could be solved by improving it (Maathai 2008). Maathai, challenged with the task of answering their problems, asked herself, "Why not plant trees?" (Maathai 2008). Trees offer numerous services Kenyan women rely on throughout their day-to-day lives: shade, wood, soil-binding to protect watersheds, and food. Trees could heal the land and bring back the vitality of the earth. Out of this concept, the Green Belt Movement was born.

The Green Belt Movement

The Green Belt Movement, founded by Maathai in 1977, is a grassroots NGO that focuses on environmental restoration and recovery in Kenya at the community level (Maathai 2006). Unlike many NGOs that work throughout Africa, the Green Belt Movement is not a foreign-run organization. It is an indigenous initiative led by Kenyans, many of whom are women, and is registered and headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya (Maathai 2006).

Maathai and the Green Belt Movement focus on reforestation, specifically how it can be used to improve the lives of rural women in Kenya. While working with the NCWK, Maathai developed the idea to include village women in the tree planting process. Tree planting would be used to simultaneously slow deforestation and desertification while improving living conditions for the women (The Green Belt Movement 2021). According to the Green Belt Movement's website, it was "founded…to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing" (The Green Belt Movement 2021, n.p.).

The Green Belt Movement focused on multiple community-level projects in its early years, including food security and water harvesting at the household level, civic education, environmental advocacy, and training workshops (Maathai 2006). The most popular part of the movement was the tree planting campaign that spread to many districts as more women's groups across the country joined in (Maathai 2006). By planting trees, a sustainable source of fuel could be established in each community. Women would not need to walk long distances each day to collect wood or ration their fuel usage. The campaign also generated income for women's groups through the repurchasing of nurtured seedlings. In addition, the campaign spoke at schools with the goal of teaching younger generations about the importance of conservation. Most importantly the campaign, led and staffed by women, demonstrated the capacity of women in development (Maathai 2006).

Maathai's Approach to Activism

Maathai's environmental activism is a great example of an ecofeminist approach to activism and sustainability advocacy. Coined by French author and feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, ecofeminism is a subcategory of feminism that focuses on the intersection of women's issues and environmental concerns, framing this dynamic as a result of patriarchal, male-dominated societies (Salmon 2007). The basis of ecofeminism stems from the thought that women's values are more aligned with nature than with those of men. While women are seen as

working in union with nature, men favor a hierarchical approach in which their actions stem from a desire for dominance (Salman 2007). From this thought process, the ecological crisis the world faces today is directly linked to the male desire to control nature. Ecofeminism examines the oppression of women and the natural environment as emerging together over 5,000 years ago with the rise of the Western patriarchy (Salman 2007). The western patriarchy separates male from female and human from nature.

Because of the close linkages between women and the environment, women across the globe are usually the first people in a community to notice the effects of environmental degradation. Women are the first to notice when the water they use to bath their children is discolored or smells different (Salman 2007). Women are the first to notice when the springs they haul water from each day are shrinking or becoming muddied with sediment. Women are the first to notice their children developing strange illnesses. Through their close work with nature on a daily basis, especially in acts relating to motherhood, women have played conscious roles in protecting the environments they rely on for food, fuel, water, or other ecosystem services. Women's involvement in environmental protection effectively transformed the twentieth century progressive environmental conservation efforts from an elite male endeavor into a widespread movement (Salman 2007).

The Green Belt Movement lead by Maathai serves as only one example of the ways in which an ecofeminist approach to activism has cultivated positive environmental change through the labor of women. Rural women in Kenya were being directly impacted by the exploitation of the land. Maathai worked to combat the environmental degradation by planting trees, often employing women from the different regions to complete the work. These women, as their proficiency and skills developed in forestry, were soon dubbed "foresters without diplomas" (Maathai 2006, 28). While being given a source of income, women were simultaneously improving their environment and quality of life by planting trees. They could directly reap the benefits of their labor. By acknowledging that environmental degradation was a women's issue and then approaching the problem in a way that directly involved women, Maathai successfully worked to restore the environment and improve the quality of life for inhabitants.

Similar to the rise of the Green Belt Movement as a result of women noticing the degradation of Kenya's environment, Love Canal represents another example of ecofeminist activism in the United States. Dubbed one of America's greatest environmental tragedies, Love Canal in upstate New York served as a toxic chemical dumping ground for Hooker Chemical Company for over three decades before being sold and developed on in the 1950s (EPA 1979). The land that was once used to bury over 20,000 tons of toxic waste became the site for a new elementary school and a neighborhood for working-class Americans (EPA 1979).

Lois Gibbs, a young mother and housewife, moved into the new neighborhood with her family in 1972 (Konrad 2011). After only a few short years, Lois and other wives in the area began to notice mysterious illnesses in their children (Salman 2007). Additionally, the incidence of miscarriage and children born with birth defects was elevated (Thompson, Rothman, and Regan 2018). In an interview with PBS in 2018, one resident of Love Canal claimed to have 11 miscarriages during her time there (Thompson, Rothman, and Regan 2018). Another spoke about how her son died of a rare kidney disease in 1978, an illness she connected to toxic chemical exposure (Thompson, Rothman, and Regan 2018). Shortly after Lois learned her neighborhood and her children's school lay over a toxic chemical dumping site, and that its contents had slowly begun to leach into the groundwater and surrounding area, poisoning the residents, she decided to act.

In the following years, Lois became a grassroots organizer with the goal of getting the government to relocate all 900 families suffering from Love Canal (Konrad 2011). Many other women in the area became participants in Lois' fight for environmental justice. These women formed a protest body called the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) and worked to gather information from other residents, write press releases, hold demonstrations, and distribute petitions (Newman 2001). Much of the data Lois and her team collected ended up being written off as "housewife data" despite it coming from the reports of residents and their physicians (Newman 2001). Continuing with their struggle, the LCHA reached out to other environmental organizations, senators, and representatives. Nevertheless, the Love Canal women were ignored and deemed hysterical wives (Salman 2007). The LCHA, made up almost entirely of housewives, experienced the challenge of entering the public domain and having their authority and work dismissed (Brown and Ferguson 1995). Conducting scientific research and challenging local power structures were actions that did not fit into the description of a housewife by American societal standards. To gain support and acknowledgment from professionals in the government, Lois and the LCHA had to rebrand their activism as work befitting a mother, effectively moving into the female domain (Brown and Ferguson 1995).

Maathai, in deliberating over her course of action with Uhuru Park, faced similar problems regarding patriarchal systems of power as Lois and other female activists. Speaking against President Moi on the national stage would place Maathai outside of the Kenyan societal norms that designated women as homemakers and housewives. Much like how the authority of Lois and her team of "housewives-turned-activists" was challenged by local corporate and political institutions, Maathai faced the challenge of standing against an all-male Kenyan Parliament and President in her desire to protect Uhuru Park from further development. Maathai's already outspoken, nonconformant activism from her early work in the Green Belt Movement had severe consequences to her homelife.

A Pivotal Moment in Maathai's Activism

In the 1970s, prior to the news of the development of Uhuru Park, Maathai continued to pursue activism in way that clashed with Kenyan societal norms. She opposed capitalist methods of production and the exploitation of natural resources, speaking out against the harm they were causing rural communities and women. Through the success of the Green Belt Movement, coupled with her high academic achievements, Maathai continued to make enemies in the government and in her own family.

On one July day in 1977, Maathai came home and found that her husband had left with his belongings (Maathai 2008). Looking back to that day, Maathai explained in her memoir:

> When we go through profound experiences, they change us. We risk our relationships with friends and family. They may not like the direction we have taken or may feel threatened or judged by our decisions. They may wonder what happened to the person they thought they once knew. There may not be enough space in a relationship for aspirations and beliefs or mutual interests and aims to unfold (Maathai 2008, 139).

Maathai's nonconformant activism strained her relationship with her politically active husband, Mwangi. She had a PhD, he did not. She was leading a grassroots environmental movement, he was sitting in Kenyan Parliament.

In the following days, Maathai searched for the reason why Mwangi left her. She knew she would be blamed for the failure of their relationship by the public and by Mwangi (Maathai 2008). She thought she had played the roles expected of her well enough in their marriage to satisfy him: she saw herself as a good mother, a good politician's wife, a good African woman, and a successful university professor (Maathai 2008). After her husband's abandonment, Maathai took her children and moved to another house owned by the university that employed her.

In 1979, the estrangement between Maathai and her husband entered the court system. Maathai was not ready for divorce and hoped for reconciliation. Mwangi did not falter in his decision for divorce, choosing to make the proceedings public (Maathai 2008). His reason for divorcing Maathai was that she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control" (Muthuki 2006, 30). Divorce in Kenya during the 1970s was granted only on the grounds of cruelty, adultery, mental torture, or insanity (Maathai 2008). Instead, Mwangi accused her of adultery, of causing his high blood pressure levels, and of being cruel, accusations Maathai denied on all accounts (Maathai 2008).

Throughout the trial, Maathai felt she was being stripped naked in front of her family and friends, subjected to the cruel punishment of being known only as a woman who was being divorced (Maathai 2008). Maathai was villainized by the press for challenging her husband's authority and allowing their marriage to fail. Divorce is socially stigmatized in Kenyan society: divorced women are written off as disgraces lacking respectability (Human Rights Watch 2020). Only 'decent' women manage to uphold their marriage against all odds (Muthuki 2006). Additionally, marriage is considered a way to bring women economic and social stability (Human Rights Watch 2020). If a woman's name is not on a deed to land or property, she cannot submit a claim to it in divorce (Human Rights Watch 2020). Because outspoken, nonconformant women like Maathai who challenge the authority of their husband were considered disgraceful by Kenya's patriarchal society, Maathai knew she would lose the case, and she did. After the divorce, Mwangi did not want Maathai to use his surname "Mathai." Defiantly, Wangari changed her name to "Maathai," adding an extra "a" (Maathai 2008).

Maathai's divorce, the result of her outspoken activism, was a turning point for her. After the trial, she participated in an interview and called the judge presiding over her divorce corrupt and incompetent for deciding her case based on hearsay (Maathai 2008). Maathai thought nothing of her comment but was startled to hear how much she had angered the presiding judge. He threatened her with contempt of court and explained "People…can't go around slandering judges" (Maathai 2008, n.p.). Maathai refused to retract her comment and was brought before another male judge who sentenced her to six months in jail for contempt of court (Maathai 2008).

After being released, Maathai was faced with the problem of supporting her three children without Mwangi's income. Her university salary was not enough to cover the cost of the trial while also providing for her children (Maathai 2008). When offered the position to act as a consultant for the United Nations Development Program, she chose to accept and leave her children with her husband in the hopes she would be able to provide them with a better life in the future (Maathai 2008).

Uhuru Park

Having experienced the negative impacts of her nonconformant environmental activism through her divorce, Maathai, on that fall day in her office at the University of Nairobi, was presented with a difficult decision. In the following weeks she would have to determine if standing up against President Moi to protect Uhuru Park, a green belt in the heart of Nairobi, was worth the

risk of being villainized and publicly attacked by the media and proponents of the skyscraper. Beyond being seen as subversive, Maathai also had to consider how the lives of her children would be negatively impacted if the government decided to label her as an enemy of the state.

Additionally, Maathai would be opposing the Kenyan government as the leader of the Green Belt Movement, opening the environmental organization up to ridicule from government officials and the president. Not only could she lose her name as an activist, but she risked losing her movement if the Kenyan government outlawed it in retaliation. On the other hand, if she chose to quietly stand by and allow President Moi to proceed with the development of Uhuru Park, Nairobi would lose one of its biggest green belts.

Epilogue

Maathai began her crusade against the park development soon after she learned of the project by writing simple letters to government and business officials to inquire about the existence and logistics of the project. As the plans for the park became more concrete, Maathai wrote letters on Green Belt Movement stationary to President Moi, the Nairobi city commission, and the minister for the environment and natural resources urging them to reconsider their plans to build in Uhuru Park (Maathai 2008). The regime ignored Maathai's letters, so she made her opposition public, publishing her letters officially to the Kenyan press (Maathai 2008). With the press involved, word quickly spread across Kenya. Many citizens felt powerless against the government and were happy to see someone opposing the traditional institutions of authority (Maathai 2008). The majority of the letters and appeals Maathai sent to officials across Kenya were met with no direct response. Instead, the authorities chose to speak through the media, claiming those who opposed the park were "ill-informed" (Maathai 2008). Maathai's activism was being ignored.

Nevertheless, Maathai still appealed to the people of Nairobi, encouraging them speak out against the skyscraper:

> Do not be afraid of speaking out when you know you are in the right…Speak out and stand up while you can. If ministers refuse to listen, the president will. If ministers ignore us we will keep going until our voices reach the president at the state house. He too claims to be an environmentalist and he cares for his people (Maathai 2008, 189).

Maathai's opposition went directly against President Moi's desire to be labeled as an environmentalist for his stance against the ivory trade in Kenya (Hiltzik 1989). In the following weeks, she encountered the wrath of President Moi and the male-dominated Kenyan parliament.

President Moi labeled her as a "mad-woman" criticizing her for being a "puppet of foreign masters and a threat to the order and the security of the country" (Muthuki 2006, 30). He also considered her defiance as "unAfrican *[sic]* and unimaginable for a woman to challenge or oppose men" (Muthuki 2006, 30). Many male parliamentarians dismissed her as an "frustrated divorcee" with no credentials to challenge their decision; some even threatened her with female genital mutilation[1] (Muthuki 2006, 30). Ultimately, Maathai's status as an activist and divorcee who

[1] Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a non-medical procedure that can involve the total or partial removal of external female genitalia or any other injury to female genital organs and is a traditional practice in cultures around the world (World Health Organization 2021). The practice of FGM has been shown to result in long-term and short-term risks of physical, mental, and sexual health complications in women and girls.

openly opposed the government and traditional patriarchal institutions allowed for her opponents to disregard her work.

Kenya's parliament members also attacked the Green Belt Movement publicly, denouncing it as a "bogus organization" that only erected billboards, sent Maathai on trips around the world, and collected funds for unknown purposes (Maathai 2008). One member accused Maathai of inciting civil unrest and said her and her "clique of women" in the Green Belt Movement needed to tread carefully (Maathai 2008, 191). The women of the Green Belt Movement were labeled as a "bunch of divorcées" who had no grounds the criticize the complex construction or members of parliament.

The more parliament attacked Maathai, the more the Kenyan public's opinion of government fell. As the debate over the complex continued, more organizations, such as the Architectural Association of Kenya, opposed the project (Maathai 2008). Civilians also began sending letters to the government and the press in support of Maathai's crusade, sharing their memories of the park and what it means to them: "This is where I escape from the crowded [housing] estates over the weekend or on the holidays" (Maathai 2008, 193). Maathai succeeded in gaining the public's support to stop the complex.

Unfortunately, the people's support alone would not be enough to stop the government's plans. On November 15, a few months after Maathai began her protest, ground was broken at the site of the new complex (Maathai 2008). Maathai continued to lose battles in court over the legality of the complex, garnering no sympathy from the federal judges to whom she brought her complaints (Maathai 2008). Nevertheless, the Green Belt Movement continued to drum up public support. To retaliate, the government worked to dismantle the environmental organization. In December of 1989, the government evicted the Green Belt Movement from its offices on government property that the organization gained through the support of the NCWK (Maathai 2008). When looking for new accommodations, the movement faced landlord after landlord who refused to house an organization that was blacklisted by the government (Maathai 2008). Additionally, the government audited the finances of the Green Belt Movement in an attempt to find any illegal activity it could use to ban the organization.

Despite the issues Maathai and the Green Belt Movement faced, their protest of the complex never faltered. With Maathai's leadership, the movement, which centered around the feelings and desires of the Kenyan people, succeeded in gaining traction throughout the masses. The crusade to save the park had become about more than just the conservation of greenspaces – it had morphed into a fight between the government and the voices of the Kenyan people. Similar to involving women, the people affected by environmental degradation, in her ecofeminist approach to environmental activism, Maathai called on the Kenyan people and the residents of Nairobi who would be negatively impacted by the construction of the complex to help her in her fight to preserve Uhuru Park. By involving local interests, Maathai consistently bolstered the effectiveness of her leadership and activism. The fight also traveled to other countries that were now reporting on the park. Foreign investors and donors began to waiver in their original support of the complex (Maathai 2008). On January 29, 1990, the government announced its plans to scale back the size of the complex. For the next few years, the construction of the park did not progress. On February 2, 1992, more than two years after Maathai and the Green Belt Movement began their protest, the fences surrounding the land that marked the complex's construction site were taken down, bringing the plans to build the skyscraper with them (Maathai 2008). Later that day, Maathai brought a wreath to hang at the site to celebrate the preservation of Uhuru Park.

As a result of her environmental work and leadership, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2004 for her contributions to "sustainable development, democracy and peace" (The Green Belt Movement 2021, n.p.). The Norwegian Nobel Committee stated Maathai "stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally" (The Green Belt Movement 2021, n.p.). Maathai also served in Kenyan Parliament as a representative for the Tetu Constituency (2002-2007) and as Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources (2003-2007) (The Green Belt Movement 2021). Maathai's dedication to sustainability and women's rights will continue to garner recognition and inspire environmental movements for years to come.

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