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# The Leaders' Journal

Re-imagining Feminist Alternatives to  
Organising in Africa



AKINA MAMA  
WA AFRIKA



The LEADER's Journal is an integral part of the feminist culture of learning and knowledge creation that Akina Mama wa Afrika has initiated. It is a journal created to craft thought leadership in African Feminists and to create repositories of knowledge based on contextual issues, using feminist tools of analysis. To write is political, especially when histories of feminist knowledge have been historically undocumented or intentionally erased. The LEADER's journal aims to contribute towards the growth of feminist scholarship and the growth of the feminist movement, using writing as a form of liberation and conscientisation.

In this second issue titled: Re-imagining Feminist Alternatives to Organising in Africa, Akina Mama wa Afrika devoted time and resources towards developing the writing skills of young budding writers from across Africa and supporting them through a writing process that consisted of an eight-week virtual writing workshop that was held in 2021. The workshop was aimed at sharpening their writing skills, familiarising African feminists with the peer-review process, and in essence this process strengthened their writing skills to a level that either mainstream or more established journals would ordinarily feature.

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## About Us

Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) is a feminist Pan-African leadership development organisation that was founded in 1985 by a group of visionary African women in the United Kingdom, but later relocated to Africa with headquarters in Kampala, Uganda. Our work is rooted in feminist principles and beliefs guided by the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists which define our leadership development program and movement building activities. Our mission is to strengthen the individual and collective leadership of African women and gender expansive persons, forming strategic partnerships to tackle patriarchy and attain gender equality for a just and secure Africa.



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## Editorial

by Mbalenhle Matandela

Reimagining feminist leadership is a task for the brave; it is a process that deals with current realities and paves the way forward for generations to come. Feminism is embedded in the principles of transforming injustice, agency, and empowerment in all facets of life. There has been a concerted effort to integrate these principles into the praxis of feminism, which is the connection between theory and practice, and efforts to reimagine a life that is not plagued by patriarchy and its' sibling's white supremacy, capitalism, religion, and ethnicity. In the African context, leadership from African women and gender minorities takes into consideration the various backgrounds that inform behaviour, approach, and the language that feminism is communicated in. Silence can be a form of resistance, and at the same time speaking out in contexts or in territories that exclude women's voices is equally an act of resistance. Therefore, context is important, and resistance can take on many forms, where one is no better than the other. Rather, a culmination of these

acts of resistance chips away at the structures that oppress African women and gender minorities and keep them on the margins of society. Reimagining feminist leadership is an imaginative process that requires a radical feminist consciousness, decolonial thought and the audacity to be visionary, despite marginalisation and violence.

Violence is structural and systemic, so it shapes realities and is embodied. Women's bodies are subjected to this violence, and it is exacerbated in times of conflict. In Africa, conflicts arise due to territorial tensions, ethnic divisions, bad governance and corruption, power struggles and the ownership of natural resources. These conflicts vary in nature, intensity and scope but affect every aspect of the lives of civilians. Conflicts devastate families, homes, communities, and the well-being and safety of human lives. These negative impacts of war are felt disproportionately by women and children, which necessitates a feminist analysis of conflict



and peace. In *'Ending Armed Conflict: African Women Redefining Activism for Nation-building'*, Estella Achinko argues that **“a gendered perspective in peacebuilding is essential for preventing and mitigating new iterations of violent conflict. A gendered analysis is also essential for assisting societies recover from current conflicts”**. A gendered analysis assists with understanding the human rights violations that occur and endanger the lives and the well-being of women and gender minorities. Women and girls are exposed to sexual violence, rape, AIDS/STD's, unwanted pregnancies, domestic abuse and many more consequences of patriarchy that contribute to gender inequality. Gender inequality is also rife for those fleeing war, where the refugee experiences of women put them at risk of not receiving adequate medical attention and access to sexual and reproductive health services. Violence does not only exist during wartime, but a culture of violence or otherwise known as militarism, can continue the patterns and behaviours of violence.

Sexual violence is one of the ways that violence continues in wartime and in times of 'peace'. It is a form of violence that is targeted at the bodies of African women and is linked to power and domination. Within the context of war, women's bodies are used as territories for battle by men and soldiers. Sexual violence is destructive to women's physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing, and stems from the violent masculinities that war shapes. Sexual violence includes sexual assault, rape, gang rape and sexual slavery. Speaking out about sexual violence has consequences for survivors, especially because survivors are ostracised by society and are considered as being damaged or permanently marked. Patriarchy allocates blame and shame to survivors, which is due to the power that the sexual violence strips away from them. There have been concerted efforts made by survivors and activists to break

the culture of silence around sexual violence on social media, and to seek justice through international, regional, and domestic legislation.

In terms of international peace and security policy, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSCR 1325 that anchors a gendered perspective on women and security highlighting the equal participation of women in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. The landmark resolution also stresses the importance of taking special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. Achinko (2022) draws from an in-depth analysis on the gendered implications of African conflict and the responses of women towards the international declaration on women, peace, and security and their activism towards peace. In Liberia, women's peace activism transformed pain into action, and connected women from different religions and communities to protest fourteen years of civil war and conflict. The direct action of the women in Liberia led to the formation of Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and 'Women in Liberia Mass Action for Peace' that applied pressure on the government and the peace process. The women in Liberia staged sit-ins outside the Presidential Palace, blocked windows and doors during the peace talks and stripped naked to protest violence. The violence that their bodies felt as pain was transformed into a powerful political force in Liberia. This powerful force led to the success of having the first female Head of State, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and lay the foundations for feminist peace. Feminist peace includes the reconstruction of society, and it involves the undoing of violence in the institutions of society, including laws related to gender, the inheritance of land, education, and gender-based violence prevention and response.

Although gains have been made by feminist



activism, rape still happens. How would women resurrect themselves and come alive after such experiences of violence? Pain can be debilitating, and all consuming, but liberation takes revolting against oppression and connecting to the resurrection of a struggle that links to generations of women. Resurrection can feel like “walking for the first time, wobbling like toddlers, on feet which have learned their purpose for the first time – under the sun” (Mubeezi, 2022). Tenda Mubeezi (2022) speaks about the bravery that is needed to achieve gender justice and the process of digging oneself out of pain, healing the scars and learning how to raise the voice of defiance. It is a resurrection of narratives of women survivors and fighters that has been erased in history and suppressed in the present. There are dominant narratives that surround sexual violence that invalidate the lived experiences of survivors and silence their voices of resistance. Sika Kudjawu (2022) in *‘Exploring the Construction of Sexual Violence Facts through Ghanaian’* looks at the socio-political nuances of the rape narratives that are framed and experienced through the online conversations on the BBC’s 2019 documentary *‘Sex for Grades’* on transactional sex in Ghanaian and Nigerian higher educational institutions. ‘Sex-for Grades’ (S4G) addresses the institutional violence that leads to lecturers demanding sex in exchange for grades, which shows how sexual violence manifests and highlights issues of consent and agency.

In the higher education system, sexual violence is common in the hierarchies of power that exist between students and lecturers. These hierarchies create power structures that produce victims and perpetrators and are subject to abuse by those who want to assert power and dominance and objectify women. *‘Sex for Grades’* illuminated the normalisation of this kind of violence and the ineffectiveness of justice and accountability measures in universities. In educational institutions, the credibility of the voices of survivors is often

questioned due to normalisation of this violence. It is also compounded by the actions taken to continue the mode of ‘business as usual’, once instances of violence have occurred. Patriarchy is a system that normalises the impunity of various acts of sexual violence such as rape, catcalling, sexual harassment, and sexist jokes, and protects itself through the violence of survivors. In Ghanaian society, Kudjawu (2022) argues that “Ghana’s cultural essentialism, which is tied to its high religiosity, and deeply embedded within its society means that older people and persons in authority are revered in the name of upholding tradition. This is often done to the detriment of young or vulnerable people and creates an unsafe environment for them to express themselves.” In an environment where there are defined structures in terms of age, gender, religion and culture, young women and sexual minorities become the most vulnerable to violence. There are instances of men being survivors of violence, and the silence is even louder on that. Women’s silence is socially conditioned, consciously, and unconsciously, from a very young age and affects survivors’ ability to confront, speak out and heal from experiences of sexual violence. It is the romanticisation of this kind of silence that Atem (2022) addresses, which leads to the entitlement of women’s bodies, the abuse and lack of accountability. In other cases, silence is a weapon used to protect information or to protect unseen power.

The online space has provided a platform for abuse to be spoken about and for accountability to take place through the truth-telling of experiences of sexual violence. Online feminist activism has created transnational feminist solidarities through the binding force of the hashtag. The #MeToo movement emerged online and provided the collective space for survivors to speak up about their experiences of sexual violence. Breaking through the silence led to a cultural shift that encouraged survivors around the world to share their experiences and



advocate for justice. In South Sudan, survivors in the diaspora bravely started the hashtag #SouthSudaneseSurvivors on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These platforms were used as sites of resistance and as spaces to share painful stories for collective healing. Instead of receiving communal support, the survivors were questioned, mocked and harassed. Atem(2022) in the *'The Culture of Terrorising Outspoken Women in South Sudan'* argues that there is a high cost to being an outspoken woman, particularly when society expects silence and penalises any deviation from it. When challenging this status quo, it takes a radical feminist consciousness to stay strong at the face of adversity, and deal with the consequences that come from speaking up in a patriarchal society.

Women have always spoken up and resisted using what is at their disposal and the platforms that are available at the time. Mubeezi (2022) in *'Christianity and the Patriarchy are Bedfellows'* details the biblical story of Adam and Eve in Genesis to show how women have always been punished for exercising their autonomy and agency. Looking at Eve as our foremother as women, patriarchy is therefore seen as a bedfellow of patriarchy when Eve is cast out of paradise for choosing to take the forbidden fruits in the Garden of Eden. These fruits are seen as education, justice, and equality (Mubeezi, 2022). Defiant or 'fallen' women like Eve are also known for their flaws not their power, looking at the story of Lot's wife who was turned into salt for looking back and Rahab, who is referred to in a derogatory way. Comparing these women and how they are written about shows that narratives are powerful and can contribute towards the justification of injustice, structural oppression, and the suppression of women's voices for generations. These structural injustices are what women go to pray about so that they can lessen the burden of marginalisation. Kiwempe churches in Uganda

attract masses of women who hope to move themselves out of the margins of society through their faith. However, some of these issues are structural and are not a matter for faith and religion. Religion can be liberating, or it can be oppressive, depending on its relationship with patriarchy and how narratives of women are interpreted, and shared.

Women's narratives in South Sudan's liberation history have been omitted or documented through a patriarchal lens. South Sudanese women fought immensely for the liberation of the country, but their contributions have been erased or reduced to victimhood. South Sudanese women joined the military and took on roles outside of patriarchal gender roles, which was undermined and undocumented. This is not unique to South Sudan, as other African countries that are also deeply patriarchal have intentionally dominated or erased the contributions of women towards liberation, nation-building, and democracy. The generation that fought the liberation wars of Africa set the foundation for new forms of feminist activism to take place. Activism has transformed with the introduction of digital tools and social media platforms. Atem (2022) argues that

**“The difference between this generation of women and the South Sudanese women who came before us is that there is more access to tools, resources, and a little bit more stability in terms of security. Women of this generation have an opportunity to document and digitise their voices, and narratives. In this context, part of South Sudanese young women's generational responsibility and resistance should include documenting and digitising the stories, narratives and wins of the women who came before us, in addition to their own”.**



Therefore, it is a political project to document the lives of African women and to reclaim women's position in history. Reimagining feminist leadership requires that we look back at those narratives for inspiration, document them and draw wisdom from them for the way forward.

It is important to use an intersectional lens when drawing wisdom for African futures. Looking forward presents many challenges that are caused by the structures that allocate power in society. Without dealing with capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy in their interconnected relationship, the African context will remain untransformed. Geopolitically, Africa has been impoverished by the capitalist system that was imported during the colonial era. During the colonial era, Africa's natural resources were exploited for the enrichment of developed European nations. This type of exploitation continues and has only changed in how it manifests. Leah Eryenyu (2022) in *'The fairness of our tax system will determine if we can address gender and other social inequalities'* highlights that

**“Africa now loses nearly \$90 billion in illicit financial flows annually, which are carted off to other parts of the world. Simply put, illicit financial flows are resources that are earned, transferred, or used illegally. They can include proceeds from criminal activities like drug trafficking and money laundering, income from corruption, profits from commercial practices like tax evasion and avoidance.”**

These funds that are taken out of African economies directly enrich the Global North, affect the most marginalised in Africa and limit their access to publicly funded services

such as health, education, social infrastructure, and social welfare. Therefore, addressing illicit financial flows will assist in transforming the impoverishment of Africa and will help African governments finance their budgets for public services.

National budgets are a high-level plan that details a country's public spending for one financial year. Integrating a feminist approach into national budgets allows for power dynamics to be seen, and for the marginalised to be guaranteed their needs and rights. Health budgets are a highly prioritised area in national budgets as they affect the livelihoods and wellbeing of African nations. Health is a human right and is Sustainable Development Goal 3, which seeks to ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all ages. Leah Eryenyu in *'This is What a Feminist Budget Looks Like'* introduces feminist health budgets as the solution to address the power barriers that hinder the enjoyment of bodily autonomy and integrity, and access to affordable and quality healthcare. A feminist health budget is

**“informed by an understanding that different systems of power and oppression collude to further marginalise and deny access for individuals and groups because of their economic status, ability, sexual orientation, HIV status, etc. Therefore, a feminist health budget allocates resources with the main aim of ensuring that, not only does everyone benefit from health resources, but that resources go to the most marginalised first.”**

**– Eryenyu, 2022)**

Feminist health budgets support structural transformation and reproductive justice and are people centred. They are transparent, pro-poor, gender responsive, disability responsive



and redress inequalities. Feminist budgets are in essence a plan for feminist futures. This plan prioritises certain areas integral to gender justice. Feminist health budgets should prioritise and finance interventions for childcare and early childhood development, for gender-based violence response and prevention, mental health, menstrual hygiene and sexual and reproductive health rights.

Sexual and reproductive health rights are a feminist issue, and reimagining feminist leadership requires that the two be bound. Often thought of and researched apart, sexual and reproductive health rights discourse and feminism share similar principles. Oluwatobi Ayodele in *'Seeking Synergies: Understanding the Evidence that Links Feminism and SRHR for African Women'* highlights that

**“Feminism and SRHR both aim to transform the present status quo, which creates barriers for women and their ability to be the decision-makers of their bodies and choices. Additionally, both fields centre on the need for non-discriminatory and non-judgmental access to reproductive and sexual services, and information. Thus far, however, the common purpose and potential synergies between these two fields have gone largely unexplored.”**

– Ayodele, 2022

Feminism and SRHR discourse share the principles of bodily autonomy and integrity, intersectionality, and agency. They also oppose harmful traditional and religious practices and address gender issues such as unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, unsafe abortion, mortality rates, early marriage and HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Therefore, effective integration will

ensure the agency and autonomy of women's bodies is integral to the achievement of gender equality. Feminism and SRHR together highlight important opportunities for gender equitable resource allocation and empowerment.

Empowerment is a broad concept that has been used to shift power relations and structural inequalities. It is a process that allows individuals to make strategic choices for their benefit and to liberate themselves from a state of disempowerment. Empowerment is a contested term as it is subjective and is experienced differently and poses difficulties in its measurement. Besides its measurement, the term is often used in the development context to inscribe power dynamics between women in the Global North and women in the Global South. Women in the Global South are framed as disadvantaged or disenfranchised, on the other hand women from the Global North are framed as the savours. However, empowerment should not be another 'power over' expressed over another group. Mirelle Kayeye (2022) argues in *'Making Sense of Women's Empowerment'* that

**“empowerment approaches that work well are focused on engaging generative forms of power and centre the lives of women throughout the process of empowerment. In this instance, the focus is on 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within', and less on power over.”**

Therefore, empowerment is a combination of power to, power with and power within. These new forms of power are needed when reimagining feminist leadership. Documenting this type of change process is liberatory and is an essential part of the project of feminist thought leadership.



This publication is an active part of reimagining feminist leadership. Feminist leadership requires thought leadership and the documentation of the lived experiences of women and gender expansive persons through research. Developing a decolonial feminist leadership praxis requires research, transnational solidarities, and the sharing of information from different contexts. Akina Mama wa Afrika's feminist leadership programme journey is highlighted by Eunice Musiime in *"Reimagining Feminist Leadership Development for Social Transformation"* and connects to the debates that differentiate feminist leadership from women's leadership in Africa, which Amanda Marufu in *'Why we need more feminist leaders to dismantle the*

*capitalist system and create real change'* introduces. Marufu (2022) and Musiime (2022) both describe feminist leadership is the relationship between thought leadership, social action and participatory learning. This publication delves into each of these aspects and documents the lived experiences of African women and gender expansive people.

African feminist leaders, this is for you.



Author

**Mbalenhle  
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**Mbalenhle Matandela** is an African feminist activist, and writer who is a graduate of the University of Oxford and the University of Cape Town. Mbalenhle is the Deputy Director, leading the gender equality portfolio at Digital Frontiers. Mbalenhle manages online gender capacity-building programmes on gender and organisational change and leadership for gender equality. Previously, Mbalenhle was the Lead Consultant on Gender Equality for the AU Research Working Group at Goldsmiths, University of London. Mbalenhle has also partnered with the Heinrich Boll Foundation Nairobi and Africanfeminism.com as a Co- Editor of 'Challenging Patriarchy: The Role of Patriarchy in the Roll-back of Democracy in the East and Horn of Africa.' and Civil Rights. Defender's 'Building Feminist Practice' Pocketbook. Mbalenhle's research interests include women in African liberation movements, Pan-Africanism, feminist education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and child and maternal health. These research interests have informed her teaching at the Gender Department at the University of Cape Town.



# Ending Armed Conflict

## *African Women Redefining Activism for Nation building*

by Estella Achinko

### **Abstract**

In today's Africa, the continent continues to face violent conflicts because of political instability, bad governance, leadership, and issues arising from deep inequalities within states. The negative impact of conflict is far reaching and results in destabilisation, displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure. Each of these negative impacts have gender-specific consequences. Gender is integral to peace, and for understanding violent conflict; this gives evidence that a gendered analysis of peacebuilding is essential for preventing and mitigating new iterations of violent conflict. A gendered analysis is also essential for assisting societies recover from current conflicts. This study sheds light on women's struggles and resistance in the face of conflict, using conflict analysis that is supported by a feminist lens. It will also draw from the 'Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building' by Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2002). Furthermore, this article reveals the work that has been done to redefine women's position and role in nation building, using women in Liberia as a case study. Advocating for gendered peace has moved women in Liberia from a vulnerable position to a place of empowerment, which has been achieved through introducing new forms of activism that are necessary for the reconstruction of a post-conflict society and transitional change.

### **Key words**

*Activism, Africa, African Women, Armed Conflict, Nation Building*



“Most of today’s conflicts take place within states. Their root causes often include poverty, the struggle for scarce resources, and violations of human rights. They have another tragic feature in common: women and girls suffer their impact disproportionately. While women and girls endure the same trauma as the rest of the population -- bombings, famines, epidemics, mass executions, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, forced migration, ethnic cleansing, threats and intimidation -- they are also targets of specific forms of violence and abuse, including sexual violence and exploitation. Efforts to resolve these conflicts and address their root causes will not succeed unless we empower all those who have suffered from them -- including and especially women. And only if women play a full and equal part can we build the foundations for enduring peace -- development, good governance, human rights and justice.

In conflict areas across the world, women’s movements have worked with the United Nations to rebuild the structures of peace and security, to rehabilitate and reconcile societies, to protect refugees and the internally displaced, to educate and raise awareness of human rights and the rule of law. Within the organisation itself, the integration of gender perspectives in peace and security areas has become a central strategy.”

- Kofi A. Annan, United Nation  
Secretary General 1997-2006



## Introduction

In Africa, conflicts have varied in scope, intensity, and nature. They have had a negative impact on human lives, leaving millions of people dead, as refugees, as migrants and as displaced persons. In such chaotic states, women and girls have been the most affected and have often been exposed to sexual violence, rape, AIDS/STDs, unwanted pregnancies, domestic abuse and many more consequences that come with conflict. These effects seriously undermine their human rights and contribute towards gender inequality. Studies have shown that women and girls are the worst hit by conflict and are disproportionately affected, in comparison to men, during times of crises.

## Violence Against Women

### A Conflict Analysis

Women do not only suffer from armed conflict as direct victims, but also make up a large percentage of the world's refugees. They are vulnerable to rape and sexual violence when fleeing battles, or even on their way to refugee camps. Even at the point of arriving at the refugee camps, they are on the receiving end of sexual harassment and violence from camp officials, as well as other refugees. Often, sex is exchanged for favours. If women have been placed in a camp as a family unit, observers point to an increase in domestic violence. They are also denied adequate medical care, especially gynaecological services. Aid agencies have frequently portrayed women as powerless, helpless, and needy. Most times, after war, the violence women experience is tied to the effects of the conflict and the militarization of society, which creates a culture of violence that normalises it. (Coomaraswamy, 2003, 95).

Militarization is the culture of violence in a society that involves the use of force to control

a large population, hostages and being held captive as prisoners of war. This violence has a disproportionate effect on women, making them susceptible to constant abuse, rape and molestation. Violence has left remnants of pain and anxiety among women in conflict. In the struggle to lead countries into a post-conflict era, women carry the burden of fighting to protect themselves and simultaneously protecting their children; this burden influences their mental health.

Policy makers and health workers have observed and proven that pain, anxiety and trauma are the aftereffects of violence that affect many refugee women. An assessment of their mental health must be taken into consideration when understanding their needs and what will improve their lives. By focusing on the state of women's mental health and using it as a guideline, the opportunity for rehabilitation and recovery from past violent experiences is made possible.

The experience of sexual violence during war time is looked at with trepidation. Rape has devastated a lot of women's lives and is a specific kind of violence targeted at the body, that results in a specific type of trauma. (Duska, 2003, 103-105) analyzes rape as a unique violent act, because the extent of the violence is determined by the behavior of the perpetrator and the extent of the force used to control the victim.

Rape happens to women who are married or are in relationships, within families, and at the hands of strangers or acquaintances; It finds its fullest expression in the context of war.

Most cases of rape involve male violence against women, where women are made passive victims of harm targeted at the body. As an act of violence enacted by men against women, rape has several aspects:



- » rape is a sexually based act of violence.
- » rape is a consciously hostile, degrading, and brutal act against women with the aim of terrorizing and controlling them, humiliating them, rendering them completely helpless, and destroying them.
- » rape is an assassination of the body, mind, soul, integrity and dignity.

Rape is not classified with other acts of pure violence as it has a sexual dimension linked to power and domination. There is a failure to understand that rape is a violent act that stems from the perpetrator's feeling of superiority, need for domination, and desire to make the victim feel worthless and degraded.

Within the context of war, sexual violence has been used to assert dominance over one's enemy. Women's bodies are used as territories for battle, where rape is experienced at the hands of men/soldiers. Dominating the bodies of women from the enemy shows power over the enemy and the community that they come from. Women's bodies, which are supposed to be protected, become the battlefield where they are gang raped, highly sexualized and under attack, as their sexual organs are mutilated, or destroyed; they are sometimes stripped and paraded naked; they are often made to dance naked in front of enemy soldiers; they are sometimes enslaved and made to cook and clean for the men and soldiers of other communities. They experience all this due to the violent masculinities that emerge in the context of war. These violent masculinities gain their sense of power through the defilement of the female body.

When rape occurs outside the context of war, the survivor's behaviour is questioned. Patriarchy puts shame and guilt on the survivor, and questions who provoked the violence.

When women do speak about their experiences of rape despite the taboo and stigma, the first question that is asked is whether she defended herself or not. Because sexuality is in many respects regarded as a taboo subject, society generally fails to provide understanding and support to the rape survivor in the same way that it does to other victims of violence. The act is not talked about, it is covered up, or it becomes the target of curiosity and voyeuristic interest. The survivor is considered permanently marked, degraded, and is ostracised by society.

It is important to question whether the rights-based approach to gender equality has helped to put an end to conflict and sexual violence in Africa, and whether it has mitigated sexual violence against migrant women.

In seeking out measures implemented by the international community on sexual violence in armed conflict, (Sellers, 2000) argues that the early codes of chivalry were explicit about the prohibition of rape during war time. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this was not present. The Hague Convention and the Geneva Convention speak about the violation of honour, but the Geneva Convention does not explicitly refer to sexual violence being a breach that falls under universal jurisdiction, and as a breach that holds an individual criminally responsible. Due to intense campaigns by women's movements, in July 2000, the International Criminal Court, passed laws that make rape and all forms of sexual violence a war crime and a crime against humanity. This applies to both internal and external wars in the international community.

In terms of African legislation and policy, the African charter guides African states on the values and virtues of African civilisation, which should guide their laws and actions using



the concept of human and people's rights. It contains traditional, civil, and political rights as well as socio-economic and cultural rights. The charter also provides that individuals have duties as well as rights. Both the preamble and article 2, the non-discrimination provision, specifically include sexual violence as a form of discrimination that is prohibited. In addition, the charter outlines that the differential treatment between sexes goes against human and people's rights and states that there should be equality before the law, and that all should enjoy the equal protection of the law (Banda, 2005, 47-51).

African States' commitment to human rights has been reinforced by the adoption of the Grand Bay (Mauritius) Declaration and Plan Action 1999. The rights of women and children were highlighted as a central concern. The High Court drew from the African charter and was able to engage with human rights by pointing to a commitment to the principles of equal protection before the law and non-discrimination on the basis of their sex. In addition, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Protocol on Women's Rights, commonly known as the Maputo Protocol, have continued to play a major role in advancing women's status in Africa.

Once known as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the African Union has become the regional body that has accelerated engagement with human rights issues. From its founding document, the constitutive Act 2000, it is clear that the AU not only focuses on human rights, but also focuses on the rights of women in Africa. Gender has been mainstreamed into AU policy and this is evident in the call for equal representation of women in all AU organs. It is noteworthy that the President of the Pan African parliament is a woman. As commendable as these formal commitments

are, it is important that these initiatives affect the realities of women on the continent. The AU organs all have a specific mandate, but essentially, they should all be actively engaged in ensuring the development of an equitable, transparent, accountable and (above all) democratic institutional framework. These developments are formed in the hope that they will be implemented both at a regional and domestic level, and that they will protect the rights of women in Africa. Therefore, it is evident from both international and African policy developments that sexual violence in wartime is considered a violation of the international humanitarian law, a war crime, a crime against humanity, and an element of genocide.

## **An Assessment of Women, War and Peace**

Following the adoption of UNSCR 1325, UNIFEM (now known as UN Women) appointed two special representatives to conduct an in-depth assessment into women, peace, and security issues. In a press release from 25 April 2001, the Executive Director of UNIFEM, Noeleen Heyzer, announced that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Elisabeth Rehn would be the nominated experts to conduct the assessment that uncovers the hidden gender dimensions of war. Heyzer (2017) states that "armed conflicts affect women and girls differently from men and boys. These gender dimensions continue to be ignored. The issues at stake are enormous". This analysis informed the report that aimed to provide the necessary data and analysis to implement the UNSCR 1325. It also set out to give voice to a population group seldom heard. In addition to the mandate from the UNSCR 1325 to carry out an in-depth study on the issue, the assessment was also a direct response to the call from Graça Machel, at that time the United Nations Secretary-General's Expert on the Impact of



Armed Conflict on Children, to collect a report on the gender dimensions of conflicts and its relevance to international peace and security (Machel, 1996-2000, 47).

As part of this assessment, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Elisabeth Rehn travelled to 14 conflict-affected countries around the world, gathering evidence and testimonies on the impact of conflict on women, as well as women's role in building peace. Over the course of one year, from 2001 to 2002, the experts visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, East Timor, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; including Kosovo, Guinea, Israel, Liberia, the occupied Palestinian territories, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. Rehn highlights that the report required travelling to the most terrible and most dangerous places for women in the world (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf, 2002, vii) "It was quite a journey. All we saw affected us deeply. A feeling grew inside, that so much more needs to be done for women around the world. We decided to tell the women's stories we met with their own voices. We refused to write a glossy polished UN report where only nice things are said." Nor Rehn or Johnson Sirleaf were strangers to war and with their personal history, they understood world politics and critical political moments. Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf (2002, vii) argued that "this is an opportunity to improve protection for women in armed conflict and to strengthen women's contribution to peace processes and to rebuild their communities".

For most people affected by war, conflict does not only include the firing of gunshots and the dropping of bombs. Conflict also leads to the disruption of lives and childhoods, and results in the scarcity of food and resources, in sexual violence and economic devastation. According to the independent experts' assessment, the media too often portrays women as victims

rather than as activists or analysts. The experts found it difficult to describe the atrocities women experience in war in a way that does not automatically connect women with the characteristics of passivity and helplessness. To avoid these kinds of stereotypes the experts explain the concept of gender:

**“Conflict can change traditional gender roles; women may acquire more mobility, resources, and opportunities for leadership. But the additional responsibility comes without any diminution in the demands of their traditional roles. Thus, the momentary space in which women take on non-traditional roles and typically assume much greater responsibilities – within the household and public arenas – does not necessarily advance gender equality.”**

**(Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf, 2002: 117-173)**

Despite the horrors women were facing in conflict areas, the assessment also highlights that women in conflict areas have not let go of the hope for gender transformation in post-conflict society, and have used their agency to initiate their own peace processes.

**“Women are surviving horror and rebuilding war-torn societies in ingenious and creative ways are indeed worth celebrating and documenting. That women have no choice but to do so, and that their under-resourced peace-building efforts are not acknowledged or funded, is yet another layer of injustice”**

**(Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf, 2002: 8)**

Every day we hear about new conflicts and



old grievances escalating violently in African countries. Many of the women who contributed to the content of the assessment have not experienced any other state of living other than war and/or conflict. The experts highlight that the women who have shared their experiences in this report hope that their voices will be heard and that the world will listen.

**“We feel great pain to know that our attackers, the people who killed our husbands and male relatives, who tortured, raped and mutilated us, have not been punished,” a young woman told us. “Many of these people are in exile. It is as if they are being rewarded for the crimes that they committed. They deserve to be punished. And what is happening to us here? We have been reduced to suffering, begging and misery. It is as if we are the guilty ones. We would like you to be a voice for us, by asking the United Nations and the international community for justice. Then we can rebuild our lives.”**

**(2002, 95)**

In their recommendations, Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf (2002) emphasise women’s call to the international community and their governments to assist in stopping the violence. The call includes the adoption and vigorous enforcement of laws aimed at protecting women and ensuring their human rights. The experts also emphasised the necessity of having the presence of women in peace negotiations, and a more significant role in peacebuilding, peacekeeping missions, reconstruction processes and humanitarian interventions. Along with this recommendation, the women in conflict areas called for the establishment of an International Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and for more women to be

appointed to United Nations diplomatic and peacekeeping posts.

If viewed in a narrow context, the UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda can be seen as a development of international law that was developed to respond to the protection of women and girls in conflict zones. When looking at the broader context of the UNSCR 1325 and the series of gender related resolutions, they are all a historical endeavour to integrate a gender perspective into the work of the United Nations and its member states in their work to promote equality, protection, and peace. Therefore, the assessment can be seen as an important product of its time as it shares more comprehensive knowledge and information on the role of women in war and conflict, as well as peacebuilding contexts (Laukka, 2018, 16).

## **Women’s Activism Efforts in Building Peace in Africa**

The international community acknowledges that peace is a precondition for sustainable development and conflict resolution. Peacebuilding is seen as a multidimensional goal that necessitates a multifaceted response from many actors, including the old, young, men and women, in the construction of a post-conflict state. Women have a right to have their views and concerns heard in the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Excluding them from peace talks is, therefore, a serious omission because it denies women the right to have their voices heard.

In countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan and Somalia, women have shown exceptional ability in handling and resolving conflict through peace processes. Women have used and created space for addressing issues that impeach on their rights as citizens of their states and on the wellbeing of their communities. (Cockburn, 2007, 3) adds



that “In looking at women’s militarism and war, we focus on different kinds of war and women’s initiative against it.” A feminist standpoint situates women and men within multiple systems of domination, where they are able to discern and confront oppressive power structures. Standpoint feminists argue that individuals can be both oppressed and privileged based on the social structures that define them, this is called social location. When looking at women-led initiatives and peace processes, social structures that affect women’s lives should be taken into consideration as a guide for their activism, and so that both their individual and collective struggles are made visible. Many war contexts need to politicise women’s bodies and actions to show the resilience and agency of women when leading peace processes or when engaging in peace activism.

## Case study

### *Liberian Women in Conflict Resolution*

The fourteen years of the Liberian Civil war was a time where many women experienced a gross display of patriarchy and political violence. It was a period of turmoil and misery heightened with rape and victim abuse, mutilation, gross humiliation, and the disempowerment of women. During this time, women could no longer bear being victims and instead, positioned themselves as fighters for the establishment of peace and freedom in their nation. In 2002, the women in Liberia were tired of seeing their country torn apart by war and led by social worker Leymah Gbowee, they started to gather and pray in a fish market to protest the violence. The women had had enough of pain and killings of their children as Gbowee puts it, they were:

**“Fed up with the war, fed up with boys putting their hands under women’s**

**clothes looking for what they said was guns and pistols. Fed up with our daughters to warm the beds of some drug embolden fighter. Fed up with our sons being recruited into malicious acts and fed up with Taylor’s agenda,”**

### **(The Oslo Freedom Forum)**

The women of Liberia had endured so much pain, which they transformed into direct action. They took to the streets and the embassies to protest the violence. They also wrote petitions to international organisations for support. They organized the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and issued a statement of intent: “In the past we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases, and watching our children and families destroyed, war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails.” Christian and Muslim women joined forces to create ‘Women in Liberia Mass Action for Peace’ and wore white to symbolize peace. They staged silent nonviolent protests and forced President Charles Taylor into a meeting that resulted in him attending peace talks in Ghana.

In 2003, a delegation of Liberian women went to Ghana to continue to apply pressure on the warring factions during the peace process. They staged a sit-in outside of the Presidential Palace, blocking all the doors and windows and preventing anyone from leaving the peace talks without a resolution. Women in Liberia Mass Action for Peace became a political force against violence and against their government.

Men accused these women of being threats, but despite that they persisted in their struggle. The last straw was when the police came to arrest activist Gbowee and her response was; “I will make it easy for you, I will strip naked.” Because of this, they had to let go of her immediately. This



act of stripping naked raised a lot of questions internationally. In Africa, it is considered a bad omen for an elderly woman to strip naked in public. But this was how far it took for the women in Liberia to bring about freedom, and it connected Liberian women to other parts of Africa where this method of protest has been used. Finally, in 2005, the women were able to achieve peace in Liberia after the 14-year long civil war and later helped bring into power the country's first female Head of State, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This activism, which was led by Liberian women, achieved peace as the first milestone in addressing gender inequality and then also promoted women in leadership.

## Role of Liberian Women in Nation Building

Women's activism in Liberia was forged through the strength and unity of women from different religious backgrounds and from different communities, which created a social movement that promoted a vision of peace that went beyond the negotiating table. Their activism resulted in a political transition, which saw women play a prominent role as participants in collective action and as leaders for a post-conflict society. Women in Liberia continue to advocate for good governance by making the government accountable to its people and by creating the need to have more women in political positions. They have maintained constant peer-reviews with the newly elected First Female President and the women's movement on a periodic basis. In addition, part of their mandate now includes the education of the girl-child. Gbowee explains that; "A nation can never progress from where it is unless education is prioritised." This can be seen in the mentoring programme that these women have implemented in schools, there rape and the abuse of girls in school is still rife.

Furthermore, the women's movement in Liberia has tackled women's rights issues and equal participation in the development of laws that affect women, including rape and women's inheritance. They also initiated community-based initiatives that address teen pregnancy, sex work and alcoholism, and other issues that young girls encounter in their communities. Therefore, the women's movement had a broad vision of what peace looks like and they continue to work towards countering gender inequality and attaining freedom and agency for the next generation of women in Liberia. Thus, reconstructing the nation of Liberia has not been an easy road after fourteen years of conflict, and women's contribution to the struggle for peace should not be undermined or undervalued. Women's role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding achieved many gains and their struggle took a lot of determination, passion, and love for the nation. They achieved gains on gender equality and women's political participation without disregarding their sufferings and harsh realities, but instead used this to forge collective action. Therefore, one could say that women are the cornerstone of a nation and that no development can take place if women are not fully involved. The women in Liberia succeeded in connecting women from different communities and found strength in that sisterhood. This solidarity denounced the workings of patriarchy and helped them assert themselves as change agents in their communities.

## Conclusion

Women have played important roles in the process of peace building in Africa. Each of these roles are important for the attainment of peace and security in conflict areas. Women fulfilled the role of being activists and advocates for peace on the one hand. On the other



hand, they took positions as peacekeepers, relief aid workers, mediators, trauma healing counsellors, and policymakers. Women took on these roles to 'transform relationships' and to address the root causes of violence. Lastly, as educators and participants in the development process, women contribute to build the capacity of their communities and nations to prevent violent conflict from reoccurring. By addressing education, women influence the process of socialisation and bring with them the historical experience of unequal gender relations to teach about gender equality, and to influence behaviour and values. The role of women in nation building is, therefore, very critical for achieving gender equality and for understanding the different aspects of society where women's leadership is needed in Africa. Women have successfully led large social movements, educated young girls, and still continued to advance the feminist cause transnationally.

Women's participation in Liberia's conflict resolution has helped to integrate gender equality into the political, economic, and social domains of the country. Through the activism of the women's movement, the country saw the election of the first female President and recreated a new constitution. Women's organisations contributed to the culture of national peace and had a broader mandate for peace that addressed governance and the egoistic patriarchal agenda initiated exclusively by men. Women's peace movements are gaining more recognition and have been empowered to gain a unified voice. They have received financial assistance from the international community and have had opportunities to participate in training workshops organised by the United Nations, Catholic Relief Services, and the National Endowment for Democracy. Their political activism has strengthened their agenda and has assisted the women's movement in Liberia to forge transnational solidarities.

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# The Resurrection

*(for the ones who overcame and the ones on the journey to...)*

by Mubeezi Tenda

There we lay  
alive in our tombs  
miles deep into the bowels of the earth  
stretched out in body bags.  
Our feet and wrists bound  
to chains, sinking their cold canines  
into our soft flesh.

We did not have...

we did not have the breath  
to bring the words that lay  
like clay, thick and heavy  
at the bottom of our hearts.  
To rise and float to our lips,  
our lungs were bags full of stale air  
And it hurts to breathe.

And the tears...

The tears slid silently  
Beneath our closed eyes.  
And even though  
the salt of our tears  
Was medicine,  
but on our raw wounded souls  
It stung.

Weakly...

Weakly, we whimpered  
And the chorus of our whimpering  
Became a song;  
A slow sad song that  
cut deep set frowns  
On the forehead of God  
As he rose from his throne.

And the earth shook...

It shook until it cracked  
And ropes of the sun were lowered.  
They snaked their way to us  
And lay coiled on our shut eyelids,  
So we clawed our way up  
Guided by the ropes of gold.  
And we broke out  
and saw the surface  
of the kind sun

And for the first time...

walking for the first time  
Wobbling like toddlers  
On feet which had learned  
Their purpose for the first time  
Under the sun.

And the sun...

The sun dried our wounds  
And in their place, left us with  
Beautiful scars.  
We did not carry them with shame,  
But wore them proudly  
Like shiny gold medals.  
Then, we lifted our arms  
And embraced the sky

Then we saw them...

We saw them  
at a distance,  
Hurdled together like children  
Staring at the face of a horrifying tale.  
They were just like us,  
So we greeted each other.  
But they raised their voices  
And chanted words





That clicked like butcher's knives.  
 We were puzzled  
 as to why their hearts aborted us  
 Until we looked at ourselves  
 And saw  
 That they did not understand  
 The grime and the scars.

So we tried to explain...

We tried to explain  
 But they, intoxicated  
 With their knowledge,  
 drowned our pleas in their din.  
 And they charged at us,

In a bid to make us retreat,  
 But we chose to brave their blades.

And their cutlasses...

Their cutlasses  
 glistened scarlet  
 With our blood.  
 But it did not deflate our spirits,  
 Because in our hearts  
 We knew  
 That our victory lay solely  
 in our bravery.



Author

**Mubeezi  
 Tenda**

**Mubeezi Tenda** is a feminist writer who owes her socio-economic liberation to the feminist movement. Over the years, feminist literature has provided her with the clarity and drive to reclaim her humanity from cultures and systems imbued with misogyny. In a quest for means to give back and offer continuity to this liberation work, she has found writing the most natural tool to inspire and advocate. She spent five years in a medical research organization collecting qualitative data in rural Uganda, which sparked a fire in her to provide visibility to the various issues affecting women and girls.



# Exploring the Construction of Sexual Violence Facts through Ghanaian Twitter Narratives

by Barbara Sika Kudjawu

## Abstract

In today's Africa, the continent continues to face violent conflicts because of political instability, bad governance, leadership, and issues arising from deep inequalities within states. The negative impact of conflict is far reaching and results in destabilisation, displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure. Each of these negative impacts have gender-specific consequences. Gender is integral to peace, and for understanding violent conflict; this gives evidence that a gendered analysis of peacebuilding is essential for preventing and mitigating new iterations of violent conflict. A gendered analysis is also essential for assisting societies recover from current conflicts. This study sheds light on women's struggles and resistance in the face of conflict, using conflict analysis that is supported by a feminist lens. It will also draw from the *'Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building'* by Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2002). Furthermore, this article reveals the work that has been done to redefine women's position and role in nation building, using women in Liberia as a case study. Advocating for gendered peace has moved women in Liberia from a vulnerable position to a place of empowerment, which has been achieved through introducing new forms of activism that are necessary for the reconstruction of a post-conflict society and transitional change.

## List of Acronyms

API	Application Programming Interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
ITU	International Telecommunication Union.
S4G	"Sex-for-grades"
WHO	The World Health Organization



## Introduction

“Seeing is believing,” says Jake “but I don’t have to see it before I believe because it’s not one person that is saying it”. His answer was in response to his opinion on transactional sex in educational institutions during a focus group discussion (FGD) with young Ghanaian adults. One’s belief of sexual violence or lack thereof does not negate that according to a WHO<sup>1</sup> report, nearly 1 in 3 women (who are the majority of victims) globally experiences one form of sexual violence in their lifetime. In Ghana, 30% of women and 23.1% of men have, throughout their lifetime, experienced one act of sexual violence<sup>2</sup>. Despite these statistics, hegemonic narratives continue to discount the lived realities of survivors and persons vulnerable to sexual violence in public spheres<sup>3</sup>.

Sexual violence is traditionally defined as “a sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances to traffic, or other coercive actions directed against a person’s sexuality by any person, irrespective of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”<sup>4</sup>. Due to its pervasiveness, sexual violence

rears its head in many social settings from the family unit, places of worship, academia, and workplaces. The culture of silence around these issues means that the adverse effects (physical, mental, reproductive, and social) of these acts are exacerbated<sup>5</sup>. It affects people’s access to healthcare, education, employment, and decent life in general. Underneath the discrimination, vulnerabilities, and inequalities that make sexual violence possible, other causes that make sexual violence rampant are revealed.

## Background to the Study

Globally, feminist activists have attempted to dismantle institutionalised inequalities that marginalise persons along the lines of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geographic location and other identities. In Ghana, several institutional and state commitments have emerged in the sexual violence terrain. For instance, Sections 97 and 103 of the Criminal Offence Act 1960 (Act 29)<sup>6</sup> criminalise rape and indecent assault, respectively. Moreover, various movements in Ghana have served to push for policy change, from ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) in 1989 to establishing the Women

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and Juvenile Unit (WAJU) of the Police Service (now Domestic Violence Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU)) in 2003 and then the Domestic Violence Act in 2007<sup>7</sup>.

Despite these successes, policy implementation tells a different story. Pervasive behaviours and norms affect the decisions that victims take when deciding whether or not to seek legal redress. If they do, they are exposed to unavailable or ineffective post-violence care, that is coupled with complex and traumatic reporting procedures, and the low incarceration rate of perpetrators affect the victim/survivors and become deterrents<sup>8</sup>. In the wake of heightened calls to abolish carceral systems (stemming from increasing police brutality), it is perhaps time to address the structural and social practices and norms that prevent people from getting justice.

For critical feminist theorists, digital tools, as much as social institutions, provide an avenue for exploring the nuances of access and consumption that create opportunities for the exclusion of marginalised communities<sup>9</sup>. On Ghanaian Twitter (a term used to localise online discourse among Ghanaians relating

to Ghanaian issues and happenings), bouts of anti-sexual violence conversations are sparked by frequent cases of sexual assault.

Twitter has been employed as a “site of resistance”<sup>10</sup> to protect and promote the rights of women. This work has been initiated by feminists who lead conversations around sexual violence, and the conversations have the potential to support the learning, relearning and unlearning of sexual violence attitudes and norms<sup>11</sup>. This social observation sets the tone of this study and assists in carving out feminist realities and resistance online.

## Importance of Research

Sexual violence remains pertinent to various fields like gender studies, sociology, criminology, and clinical studies. These fields explore the broader societal and individual implications of sexual violence. This study, grounded in critical feminist theory, will critically examine the social, economic, and political contexts in which various actors interact with the digital public sphere. This study is crucial because of the emerging consensus among advocates, researchers, and development practitioners on the influences of

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social and cultural norms, and perceptions that preserve sexual violence<sup>12</sup>. This research will provide an in-depth understanding of the ways that feminist activists navigate hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives, which is crucial in designing and implementing what Michau et al.<sup>13</sup>, describes as “complementary and mutually reinforcing rather than stand-alone” anti-sexual violence interventions.

Based on these, I contribute to feminist knowledge on digital organising against sexual violence by providing rich insights into the social contexts of digitally mediated hegemonic and counter-hegemonic rape narratives.

## Central Argument and Research Question

This research situates “facts” within radical feminist theories on sexual violence, which empathise with victims’ lived experiences, and explores safe spaces for healing online. Further, the study argues that counter-hegemonic narratives on sexual violence online advocate for the transformation of social and institutional norms that preserve vulnerabilities and sexual violence.

This research seeks to answer the fundamental question: “how are the lived experiences of victims and survivors shaping narratives

around sexual violence on Ghanaian Twitter?” Consequently, it will explore these sub-questions: What facts do feminist activists contend with on digital platforms? What are the origins of these assertions? How are feminist activists and various human actors interacting to forge feminist realities and to what effect?

## Methodology

This research employs intersectionality as an approach (coined by Crenshaw<sup>14</sup>) to explore the social contexts and institutions within which sexual violence is fostered and resisted. By way of illustration, intersectionality contends that the notion that patriarchal violence enables rape myths is not enough. Instead, it seeks to unearth the classed, gendered, and cultural contexts in which these discourses occur. I employ this perspective that gives visibility to intersecting identities, fluid power dynamics and socio-cultural contexts throughout this study.

This study first employed Twitter as an ethnographic site to randomly sample tweets under the hashtag #sexforgrades, that frames both fact and fiction. I used, specifically tweets that were tweeted from 7th to 10th October 2019, which has been viewed as the peak in this hashtag’s use. My virtual ethnography findings yielded 17 twitter threads (conversations) and

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12. Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1580-1589. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61683-4; García-Moreno, C., Zimmerman, C., Morris-Gehring, A., Heise, L., Amin, A., Abrahams, N., . . . Watts, C. Ibid. Addressing violence against women: a call to action. (9978), 1685-1695. ; Michau, L., Horn, J., Bank, A., Dutt, M., & Zimmerman, C. Ibid. Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice. 1672-1684. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9

13. Michau, L., Horn, J., Bank, A., Dutt, M., & Zimmerman, C. (2015). Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice. *The Lancet*, 385(9978), 1672-1684. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9

14. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139.



36 tweets relevant to my discussion. These results led me to categorise my initial data into two themes: firstly, the social norms that form the basis of beliefs and attitudes and then secondly, the institutional response at the top that gives credence to these norms.

In addition, I conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) to efficiently corroborate these performative expressions of gendered communication<sup>15</sup>. The focus group discussion consisted of seven students (from diverse socio-economic backgrounds), who were either enrolled in tertiary institutions or had completed within a year. These young adults were between the ages of 19 and 27, of which three were men and four were women. I was particularly interested in this age group because of my entry point into the research, which analyses sexual violence within higher educational institutions.

Regarding the limitations of the study, only one FGD was conducted with seven participants. One might contend that the limited sample size is not representative and that it might affect the validity and effectiveness of the interpretation of findings and analysis. However, Bryman<sup>16</sup> argues that prioritising the sample group and focusing on the breadth and depth of the empirical discussions is more critical than sample size. It is for this reason that I concentrate on including participants from varying backgrounds.

In the case of ethical consideration for

researching virtual spaces, Twitter's User Protection guidelines permit the use of Twitter content without informed consent so long as it is not for "illegal/discriminatory purposes; investigating or tracking Twitter users or Twitter Content; profiling users; or monitoring sensitive events"<sup>17</sup>.

## Research Aim and Focus

The purpose of this study is to examine conversations on sexual violence that are mediated online critically. In doing so, it explores the socio-cultural and political nuances that frame the believability and victimisation of survivors and vulnerable persons.

This study aims to deconstruct facts and fiction (that is, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives) in the Ghanaian feminist activists' discourse, which occurs in the Ghanaian digital public sphere. I explore the origins and interactions of sexual violence facts to investigate their source and eventual impact on vulnerable persons.

Intersectionality, as an approach, leads to three assumptions in this study. Firstly, power shapes gendered relations, that form due to patriarchy, and perpetuate systemic and structural – sexual – violence; Secondly, the fluidity of power and gendered roles challenge the binary of "women as victims, men as perpetrators" in the narratives<sup>18</sup>. And instead, the approach

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15. Hammersley, M. (2006). *Ethnography: problems and prospects*. *Ethnography and Education*, 1(1), 3-14. doi:10.1080/17457820500512697

16. Bryman, A. (2015). *Social Research Methods* (5 ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

17. Twitter. (2020). *Developer Agreement*. Retrieved from <https://developer.twitter.com/en/developer-terms/agreement>

18. Cornwall, A. (2000). *Missing men? Reflections on men, masculinities and gender in GAD*. *IDS Bulletin*, 31(2), 18-27. doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2000.mp31002003.x



focuses on systems of oppression instituted within socio-cultural and political organisations of society. It is important to reiterate here that this conceptualization does not lose sight of the fact that most women are victims of sexual violence<sup>19</sup>. Finally, as a study that aims to explore the social construction of facts and fiction, an intersectional lens concentrates on individuals' lived experiences to establish facts. In doing so, it highlights culture and social norms, and is conscious of the histories and contextual underpinnings that frame a person's way of life<sup>20</sup>.

To achieve this, it first explores the politics of credibility. Next, it presents empirical findings of digital ethnography and focus group discussions undertaken during the data collection stage in order to examine social and cultural norms embedded within social units and institutions, and then continues to examine the intended effects of feminist facts.

## The Problem

### *Sexual harassment in higher educational institutions*

In Ghana, specifically, the social order has embedded a culture that mandates respect for elders and authority. There are unequal power dynamics that are never challenged that breed vulnerability and result in discrimination<sup>20</sup>. For Morley<sup>22</sup>, "hierarchical and gendered power relations" within academic institutions create an environment that objectifies women. Consequently, it is essential to analyse power dynamics that produce victims and perpetrators within specific social contexts and their ensuing relationships.

There has been significant literature on sexual harassment within universities globally<sup>23</sup>, and in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>24</sup>. One seminal work on this theme is Morley's<sup>25</sup> study on transactional sex

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19. Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1580-1589. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61683-4
  20. Mohanty, C. T. (2003). 'UNDER WESTERN EYES: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'. In R. Lewis & S. Mills (Eds.), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory* (pp. 49-74): Edinburgh University Press; Hodgson, D. L. (2017). *Gender, Justice, and the Problem of Culture From Customary Law to Human Rights in Tanzania*: Indiana University Press.
  21. Van Der Geest, S. (1998). Cpanyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 32(3), 449-493. doi:10.1080/00083968.1998.10751147; Twum-Danso, A. (2009). Reciprocity, Respect and Responsibility: The 3Rs Underlying Parent-Child Relationships in Ghana and the Implications for Children's Rights. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 17(3), 415-432. doi:10.1163/157181809x430337
  22. Morley, L. (2011). Sex, grades and power in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 101-115.
  23. Bajpai, A. (1999). Sexual harassment in university and college campuses in Mumbai. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 60(4), 606-623. ; Chan, D. K. S., Tang, C. S. K., & Chan, W. (1999). Sexual harassment: A preliminary analysis of its effects on Hong Kong Chinese women in the workplace and academia. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 23(4), 661-672. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1999.tb00390.x
  24. Britwum, A., & Anokye, N. (2006). *Confronting Sexual Harassment in Ghanaian Universities*: Ghana Universities Press; Omale, J. (2000). Tested to their limit: Sexual harassment in schools and educational institutions in Kenya. *No Paradise Yet: The World's Women Face the New Century*, 19-38. ; Nwadiogwe, C. E. (2007). Unwilling brides: 'Phallic attack' as a barrier to gender balance in higher education in Nigeria. *Sex Education*, 7(4), 351-369. doi:10.1080/14681810701636036; Shumba, A., & Matina, A. E. M. (2002). Sexual harassment of college students by lecturers in Zimbabwe. *Ibid.*, 2(1), 45-59.
  25. Morley, L. (2011). Sex, grades and power in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 101-115.



in Ghanaian and Tanzanian higher educational institutions. For her, the sexual harassment claims by women in her previous study on participation in tertiary education necessitated a separate investigation. She argues that these forms of violations contribute to “spatial and cognitive injustice” that minimises the victims’ ability to access education and to advance career-wise<sup>26</sup>.

To combat this worrying trend, several universities have instituted anti-sexual harassment policies. For example, the University of Ghana in 2011 launched its first anti-sexual harassment policies<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, Uganda’s Makerere University saw its 2006 Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy revised following a 2016 investigation into sexual harassment<sup>28</sup>. Despite these responses, persistent cases of sexual harassment remain rampant in universities, with or without the officials’ knowledge.

The following is a brief account of the BBC’s Africa Eye documentary entitled “Sex for grades’: Undercover in West African Universities”.

Released in October 2019, this investigative piece sought to reveal this widespread, well-known and normalised phenomenon in higher educational institutions called “sex-for-grades”<sup>29</sup>. “Sex-for grades” (S4G) describes situations where lecturers in universities demand sexual favours from students in return for better scores or even their merited grades<sup>30</sup>. Variants of this expression exist in other spheres, and to describe similar situations, sex is also sought for rewards, like jobs, contracts, and even social status<sup>31</sup>.

A team of female investigators was planted in top public universities in Ghana and Nigeria: The Universities of Ghana, and Lagos. According to the narrator, lecturers were picked after a six-month-long investigation into top predators in these institutions. The documentary heightened public outcry regarding this widely known and seemingly normalised phenomenon. For instance, the African Feminist Initiative issued a press release to pledge solidarity to sexual harassment and assault victims and bemoaned the phenomenon<sup>32</sup>.

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26. Ibid.

27. Hallberg Adu, K. (2011). GHANA: First university sexual harassment policy. University World News. Retrieved from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20110408183646402>

28. Nabatte, P. (2019, 31 August 2019). Mak unveils VC’s Roster of 100; amends the Sexual Harassment policy; and launches Safer Universities project. Retrieved from <https://news.mak.ac.ug/2019/08/mak-unveils-vcs-roster-of-100-amends-the-sexual-harassment-policy-and-launches-safer-universities-project/>

29. BBC News. (2019, 7 October 2019). Sex for grades: Undercover in West African universities. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-49907376>

30. Morley, L. (2011). Sex, grades and power in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 101-115.; Manuh, T., Gariba, S., & Budu, J. (2007). *Change and Transformation in Ghana’s Publicly-funded Universities: A Study of Experiences, Lessons and Opportunities*. Oxford: James Currey.

31. Okoampa-Ahoofe Jr, K. (2005). *Dr. JB Danquah: Architect of Modern Ghana*. iUniverse.

32. Obaaboni. (2019). African Feminist Initiative Releases Solidarity Statement Regarding “Sex For Grades” Scandal. Retrieved from <https://ghanafeminism.com/2019/11/09/african-feminist-initiative-releases-solidarity-statement-regarding-sex-for-grades-scandal/>



An overview of the persons implicated in the documentary includes four university lecturers. Amongst them was a religious leader and a prominent social commentator, Professor Gyampo, who was an implicated lecturer at the University of Ghana, and argued for his exoneration in one media response<sup>33</sup>. According to him, the investigator was not his student and had not had any sexual contact with them. “... **I did not sleep with her, fondle her or touch her [...]**” he says (ibid.). However, in the documentary, he is heard asking to “**kiss [the posing student] violently**”<sup>34</sup>. Regarding the blurred lines of studentship and who anti-sexual harassment policies cover, unlike the University of Ghana, the University of Makerere makes that clear distinction by prohibiting sexual harassment on or off-campus amongst persons, ranging from students to employees, and even visitors<sup>35</sup>.

He further argued that the kind of relationship he had built with the “student” was such that he had those specific conversations in an informal manner. According to Morley<sup>36</sup>, it was not until the 1970s that this “familiar behaviour” was situated within the category of sexual harassment. This argument ties into feminist theories, which extend the definition of sexual

violence by situating it on a continuum that starts with seemingly harmless comments and touches before graduating into violent acts<sup>37</sup>. Thus, this study situates the sex in “sex-for-grades” as a spectrum of acts that range from suggestive comments and conversations, and unwanted touches that could result in non-consensual sex or even murder.

Dr Amoakohene, the head of the University of Ghana’s anti-sexual harassment committee granted media interviews where she said, “[...] **The evidence does not point to sex-for-grades. When we talk of sex-for-grades, we didn’t see much involvement of the lecturers at the University of Ghana**”<sup>38</sup>. Labelling this situation as gross misconduct and not situating it within sexual violence undoes the concerted efforts of advocates and creates an environment for victim-blaming and shaming. This lack of sensitivity from people who hold such important positions, and therefore ought to know better, raises challenging questions about the institutional commitment to creating a harassment-free environment. The blurred lines between social norms, institutional responses and legalities are the grounds on which this study is founded.

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33. CitiTube. (2019). Sex for grades - Point of View [Online Video].

34. BBC News Africa (Producer). (2019, 29 June 2021). Sex for Grades: undercover inside Nigerian and Ghanaian universities - BBC Africa Eye documentary. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we-F0Gi0Lq5>

35. Makerere University. (2006). Policy & Regulations on Sexual Harassment Prevention. Kampala: Makerere University Council

36. Morley, L. (2011). Sex, grades and power in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 101-115.

37. Kelly, L. (1987). The Continuum of Sexual Violence. In J. Hanmer & M. Maynard (Eds.), *Women, Violence and Social Control* (pp. 46-60). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

38. Ankah, N. G. (2019). No evidence against lecturers in BBC’s ‘sex for grades’ documentary - UG. Retrieved from <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/no-evidence-against-lecturers-in-bbc-s-sex-for-grades-documentary-ug.html>

# Sexual Violence Facts as Empirical truths?

by Barbara Sika Kudjawa

## Introduction

Feminists, as much as non-feminists, have made significant contributions to the field of sexual violence in theory and practice, with the 1970s representing a critical period in that evolution<sup>39</sup>. In the years that saw an increase in the inclusion of women's issues into development discourse, studies on sexual violence began to centre the experiences of victims, most of them being women<sup>40</sup>. In 1975 Brownmiller<sup>41</sup>, in her seminal book on sexual violence that influenced legal frameworks, criticised the silence of mainstream scholars such as Manfred Guttmacher, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Engels on issues of rape<sup>42</sup>. For Brownmiller<sup>43</sup>, this oversight was an "unwillingness to make a moral judgement" (p. 177). In redefining rape, she centres the issue of power and portrays sexual violence as not merely a sexual crime, but more as an act that asserts dominance and control over its victims. Radical feminists, like Brownmiller, differ from liberal

feminists as they advocate for transformative policy and interventions that tackle inequalities from the bottom up. Rathgeber<sup>44</sup>, argues that this radical stance is not mainstream because it requires elites to renounce their power and privilege.

## Facts and Credibility

To contextualise the pervasiveness of hegemonic narratives, this section seeks to historicise the social "invention" of facts. Partington<sup>45</sup>, in his exploration of the construction of information on the internet, draws on Shapin's<sup>46</sup> argument in *A Social History of Truth* to assert that "truth and knowledge were implicated in the social order" in 16th century England (p. 61). He says this to point out that persons in lower classes were less likely to be privileged to produce knowledge compared to "gentlemen". Gentlemen here are perceived as having and upholding honour and credibility. "Fact is not a given but is dependent

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39. Rennison, C. (2014). Feminist theory in the context of sexual violence. *Encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice*, 5, 1617-1627.

40. García-Moreno, C., Zimmerman, C., Morris-Gehring, A., Heise, L., Amin, A., Abrahams, N., . . . Watts, C. (2015). Addressing violence against women: a call to action. *The Lancet*, 385(9978), 1685-1695.

41. Brownmiller, S. (2013). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*: Open Road Media.

42. Rennison, C. (2014). Feminist theory in the context of sexual violence. *Encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice*, 5, 1617-1627.

43. Brownmiller, S. (2013). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*: Open Road Media.

44. Rathgeber, E. M. (1990). WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 24(4), 489-502. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4191904>

45. Partington, G. (2003). *Internet conspiracy epistemologies: fact, fiction and the reconfiguration of knowledge on the World Wide Web*. (Doctoral Dissertation). The University of London,

46. Shapin, S. (1994). *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Vol. 52): University of Chicago Press.



on the repeated performance of credibility”, Partington<sup>47</sup> emphasises. Foucault’s<sup>48</sup> knowledge and power theory argues that control over knowledge gives persons, societies, and institutions the power to frame narratives, and therefore dominate and reinforce them. It is, therefore, possible to contend that myths in the form of informed/uninformed hegemonic narratives serve to discredit feminist theories and dominate both digital and virtual public spheres.

## Socio-Cultural Realities

An underlying thread among scholars is the influence of patriarchal ideologies on the prevalence of sexual violence<sup>49</sup>. Patriarchy is defined as the systemic dominance and oppression of women by men<sup>50</sup>. This gendered hierarchy means that power and privilege vested in the hands of a specific demographic are asserted and replicated through various acts of sexual violence such as rape, cat-calling harassment, and sexist jokes<sup>51</sup>. This definition gives light to the gendered roles of men and

women in society, by highlighting power dynamics at play.

User 3 sums this abuse of power here: “[...] **The sex for money is a matter of moral, conscience or religious belief but #sexforgate is entirely molestation, abuse, inhuman and against human rights**” to thwart narratives that defined S4G as an act of mutual exchange.

Additionally, Ghanaian society essentialises culture to a fault.<sup>52</sup> There is a tendency, among Ghanaians, to preserve patriarchal norms under the guise of culture which is untouchable and reverend. Within this “culture”, gender norms and expectations establish and ingrain varying degrees of systemic discrimination and widen inequalities. Grounding patriarchy, within power dynamics and culture, reveals that power is not static and homogenous but changes with time and context.

Although men are implicated as purveyors

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47. Partington, G. (2003). Internet conspiracy epistemologies: fact, fiction and the reconfiguration of knowledge on the World Wide Web. (Doctoral Dissertation). The University of London,

48. Foucault, M. (1980). Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977: Vintage.

49. Hunnicutt, G. (2009). Varieties of patriarchy and violence against women: Resurrecting “patriarchy” as a theoretical tool. *Violence Against Women*, 15(5), 553-573. doi:10.1177/1077801208331246; Hill, S., & Marshall, T. C. (2018). Beliefs about Sexual Assault in India and Britain are Explained by Attitudes Toward Women and Hostile Sexism. *Sex roles*, 79(7-8), 421-430. doi:10.1007/s11199-017-0880-6; Obierufu, P. O., & Ojedokun, O. (2019). Masculinity as Predictor of Rape-Supportive Attitude among Men. *Psychological Studies*, 64(1), 41-48. doi:10.1007/s12646-019-00478-2; Sikweyiya, Y., Addo-Lartey, A. A., Alangea, D. O., Dako-Gyeke, P., Chirwa, E. D., Coker-Appiah, D., . . . Jewkes, R. (2020). Patriarchy and gender-inequitable attitudes as drivers of intimate partner violence against women in the central region of Ghana. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 682. doi:10.1186/s12889-020-08825-z

50. hooks, b. (2010). Understanding patriarchy: Louisville Anarchist Federation Federation.

51. Chandra, J., & Cervix, R. (September 2018). Rape Culture Pyramid. In. 11th Principle Consent.

52. Ampofo, A. A. (2008). Collective Activism: The Domestic Violence Bill becoming Law in Ghana. *African and Asian Studies*, 7(4), 395-421. doi:10.1163/156921008x359597; Annang, E. (2021 ). Morals of Ghanaian women are being corrupted by telenovelas - Alban Bagbin. Retrieved from <https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/local/morals-of-ghanaian-women-are-being-corrupted-by-telenovelas-alban-bagbin/k512cfd>



of patriarchal norms due to their proximity to power and privilege, Connell<sup>53</sup>, in *Masculinities* highlights different forms of masculinities (hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit) to contextualise multiple manifestations of privilege within gender hierarchies. He differentiates between complicit masculinities that sit on the side-lines in order to benefit from the oppression of women and subordinate masculinities who are subjected to a sort of demotion because of their non-conformity to rules of masculinity (p. 78-79).

In Ghana, other studies have revealed dominant notions of masculinities (fatherhood, leadership, decisive) and femininity (motherhood, respectful, submissive) that frame social interactions<sup>54</sup>. However, Fiaveh et al.<sup>55</sup> detected the fluidity of these roles in the ways that women in urban Ghana exercise their agency in terms of sexual and reproductive health by negotiating sex, even though it was done within the patriarchal confines of sexuality.

Furthermore, framing women as significant victims of sexual violence (and rightly so) inadvertently erases the notion that men tend to be victims of sexual violence. This narrative

is pronounced in the BBC documentary itself as female victims' plight was amplified, and male perspectives were conspicuously missing. Paul, a postgraduate student at the University of Ghana, has this to say, **"[...] Yes, it is a popular fact, but I can tell you for a fact that it's not only the ladies that have been abused in this manner but there are also men who go through that."** While he admits to knowing women who "willingly and unwilling" exchange sex-for-grades, he confirms that he does not personally know any man from his time as an undergraduate student who was coerced into exchanging sex for grades. He says, **"I can speak for myself, not for grades really, but when I was doing my national service, I was put in a very uncomfortable position, but it is often said that it's only the ladies, and that's not true."**

This syndrome of "missing men" is tackled by intersectional theorists who argue in favour of centring gender relations, while dismantling patriarchal norms instead of focusing on biological differences<sup>56</sup>. Perhaps the **"but men are abused too"** or **"not all men are abusers"** responses in the face of sexual

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53. Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities: Polity*.

54. Ampofo, A. A., Okyerefo, M. P., & Pervarah, M. (2009). Phallic competence: Fatherhood and the making of men in Ghana. *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 1(1), 59. doi:10.3149/csm.0101.59; Adjei, S. B. (2016). Masculinity and Spousal Violence: Discursive Accounts of Husbands Who Abuse Their Wives in Ghana. *Journal of family violence*, 31(4), 411-422. doi:10.1007/s10896-015-9781-z; Dery, I. (2018). Ghanaian men and the performance of masculinity: negotiating gender-based violence in postcolonial Ghana. University of Cape Town, Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/27944> Available from University of Cape Town OpenUCT database.

55. Fiaveh, D. Y., Izugbara, C. O., Okyerefo, M. P. K., Reysoo, F., & Fayorsey, C. K. (2015). Constructions of masculinity and femininity and sexual risk negotiation practices among women in urban Ghana. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17(5), 650-662. doi:10.1080/13691058.2014.989264

56. Cornwall, A. (2000). Missing men? Reflections on men, masculinities and gender in GAD. *IDS Bulletin*, 31(2), 18-27. doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2000.mp31002003.x; Cleaver, F. (2003). Men and masculinities: new directions in gender and development. *Masculinities matter: men, gender and development*, 1-27.



violence accusations are a -rather untimely- call by men or persons with power to advocate for an intersectional lens into sexual abuse. While this is apt and increasingly crucial in making spaces safe for all persons regardless of identity, two things are apparent. First, it needs to be done at the right time so as not to deflect from necessary anti-sexual violence discussions that are taking place. Then, it should not depoliticise the issues of vulnerable populations like women, girls and the LGBTQ community who are at higher risk of experiencing various forms of violence<sup>57</sup>. This outlook does not absolve men of their longstanding involvement in subduing women, but instead provides a more nuanced entry point to intersecting inequalities and dynamic gender relations.

Likewise, by proposing indigenous African analytical categories through which society can be understood, Oyěwùmí<sup>58</sup>, argues that pre-colonial Yoruba culture was socially organised around seniority until the Western invasion in Africa. For critical feminist scholars, hierarchy either along the lines of age, gender, religion, or any identity is dangerous because of the concentration of power in the hands of a select few, who have the propensity for marginalising those without power and privilege. In Ghana,

respect is central to the core values of adult-child social interactions. It influences how children confront authority and advocate for themselves as they navigate life<sup>59</sup>. This was portrayed in the S4G documentary<sup>60</sup>, where Dr Igbeneghu tells the undercover investigator, **“Will you be obedient? ... I want to direct you properly”**. By capitalising on his authority, he puts the investigator in a place where she cannot outrightly reject his advances. For child rights scholars<sup>61</sup>, coupled with the taboo nature of sex and sexuality, this positioning means that children, who transcend these ideas into adulthood cannot express their opinions or question the status -quos, and in effect, seek help.

Ghana’s cultural essentialism, which is tied to its high religiosity, and deeply embedded within its society means that older people and persons in authority are revered in the name of upholding tradition. This is often done to the detriment of young or vulnerable people and creates an unsafe environment for them to express themselves. A tweet depicts a typical parent-child conversation in Ghana here:

A University lecturer says to the 17-year-old he was sexually harassing in his office... **“I will tell**

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57. Obierufu, P. O., & Ezeugwu, C. R. (2017). Risk and protective psychological factors in rape supportive attitude: A systematic review. *Journal of Psychological and Educational Research*, 25(2), 141-164.

58. Oyěwùmí, O. r. n. (1997). *The invention of women : making an African sense of Western gender discourses. The invention of women .:*

59. Twum-Danso, A. (2009). Reciprocity, Respect and Responsibility: The 3Rs Underlying Parent-Child Relationships in Ghana and the Implications for Children’s Rights. *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 17(3), 415-432. doi:10.1163/157181809x430337; Van Der Geest, S. (1998). *Ɔpanyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana.* *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 32(3), 449-493. doi:10.1080/00083968.1998.10751147

60. BBC News Africa (Producer). (2019, 29 June 2021). Sex for Grades: undercover inside Nigerian and Ghanaian universities - BBC Africa Eye documentary. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we-F0Gi0Lqs>

61. Twum-Danso, A. (2009). Reciprocity, Respect and Responsibility: The 3Rs Underlying Parent-Child Relationships in Ghana and the Implications for Children’s Rights. *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 17(3), 415-432. doi:10.1163/157181809x430337



**your mum.”** Parents! This is what happens when you trust “elders” more than your children. She knew her mum would believe him, the Pastor/Lecturer, over her.

For this reason, Twum-Danso<sup>62</sup> argues that cultural values need to be leveraged to preserve valuable indigenous epistemes, while protecting the rights of the vulnerable, especially children and young people. Van Der Geest<sup>63</sup>, posits that in Akan societies, respect that is bestowed on the elderly is not static but is earned on the grounds of morality and honour. Therefore, it is essential to encourage and nurture these positive characteristics instead of problematic notions of authority and seniority.

Closely related to the politics of respect is the notion of consent. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)<sup>64</sup>, define consent as “an affirmative agreement to engage in various sexual or non-sexual activities. Consent is enthusiastic, clearly communicated, and ongoing, yes. One can’t rely on past sexual interactions and should never assume consent.” Snapp<sup>65</sup> argues that consent is that which differentiates sex from rape. They further posit that consent serves to “respect the autonomy

of a consent-holder, promote their freedom and avoid harm<sup>66</sup>. As simple as this sounds, in practice, the complexity of the principle of consent tends to topple popular socio-cultural perceptions about respect and boundaries related to oneself and society at large. For instance, if one is socialised such that their opinions are not sought or valued, what happens to their ability to give consent and advocate for their bodily integrity? Is consent only recognised when it is vocalised? Flecha<sup>67</sup> posits that while mainstream pro-consent campaigns focus on verbal consent (“no-means-no” slogans), non-verbal body language borne from intimidation needs to be equally prioritised.

The following tweet attempts to correct the narrative on consent and transactional sex by saying, **“It is not difficult to understand coercion. It isn’t difficult to understand why young women would “offer sex-for-grades” when they are forced into an environment where it is expected & professors have the power to ruin their lives.**

Furthermore, the average age of undergraduates (17 to 19-years) highlights an important aspect

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62. *ibid.*

63. Van Der Geest, S. (1998). Cpanyin: The Ideal of Elder in the Akan Culture of Ghana. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 32(3), 449-493. doi:10.1080/00083968.1998.10751147

64. National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) (Producer). (2015, 29 June). NSVRC Info & Stats For Journalists Campus Sexual Assault. Retrieved from [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_nsvrc\\_factsheet\\_media-packet\\_campus-sexual-assault.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_campus-sexual-assault.pdf)

65. Snapp, I. J. (2016). *A Theory of Consent in Sexual Relations*. (MA Dissertation). Ohio University.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Flecha, R., Tomás, G., & Vidu, A. (2020). Contributions From Psychology to Effectively Use, and Achieving Sexual Consent. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00092



of consent, which is maturity<sup>68</sup>. For some scholars,<sup>69</sup> the age of consent serves as grounds to police the autonomy of young people, especially girls, where their bodies are seen as state or communal property. So, while these same legislative instruments can feed victim-blaming narratives that imply that women's bodies, what they wear, their demeanour and attitudes, permit sexual violence. Legislating consensual sex using age still remains essential to safeguard the innocence of young people. Fully aware that the undercover investigator was below 18 years (the period to give consent to sex), Dr Igbeneghu in the documentary complimented her appearance and even said, **“Do you know that at my age if I want a girl of your age, a 17-year-old, all I need is to sweet-talk her and put money in her hand”.**<sup>70</sup> This statement brings to the fore the – supposed – immaturity of under-aged persons and their immediacy to various forms of violation.

## Institutional response

The multiple instances of silence, harmful social

norms, and structural barriers discussed above, and further compounded by institutional responses will be examined in this section. As feminists politicise the personal<sup>71</sup>, this “correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power”<sup>72</sup> means that bodies become sites for violence, for ensuring conformity and exerting dominance. Bondestam<sup>73</sup> explores institutional response at three levels: primary prevention looks at education and training to tackle core behaviours and norms that preserve sexual violence, secondary prevention prioritises the case management of legal redress, and tertiary prevention looks at victim support structures. However, despite their best efforts, institutions such as the criminal justice system, clinical care, religious institutions, and schools, are not achieving enough strides to protect vulnerable persons from sexual violence<sup>74</sup>.

Sam, a primary school teacher and the chaperone of the Achievers Club (a girls' social club) in the Savannah Region of Ghana, exemplifies the discord and ineffectiveness of targeted interventions when he shares his attempt at escalating a sexual violence allegation to the

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68. Snapp, I. J. (2016). A Theory of Consent in Sexual Relations. (MA Dissertation). Ohio University,

69. Tamale, S. R. (2001). How old is old enough? Defilement law and the age of consent in Uganda. *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights*, 7(1), 82-100. ; Parikh, S. A. (2012). “They arrested me for loving a schoolgirl”: Ethnography, HIV, and a feminist assessment of the age of consent law as a gender-based structural intervention in Uganda. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(11), 1774-1782. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.06.037

70. BBC News Africa (Producer). (2019, 29 June 2021). Sex for Grades: undercover inside Nigerian and Ghanaian universities - BBC Africa Eye documentary. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we-F0Gi0Lq5>

71. Hanisch, C. (2006). Introduction to “The personal is political!”. Online.< <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

72. Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities: Polity*.

73. Bondestam, F., & Lundqvist, M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10(4), 397-419. doi:10.1080/21568235.2020.1729833

74. Medie, P. A. (2017). Rape reporting in post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire: Accessing justice and ending impunity. *African Affairs*, 116(464), 414-434. doi:10.1093/afraf/adx008; García-Moreno, C., Zimmerman, C., Morris-Gehring, A., Heise, L., Amin, A., Abrahams, N., . . . Watts, C. (2015). Addressing violence against women: a call to action. *The Lancet*, 385(9978), 1685-1695.



District Education level:

**“I was the first point of call when issues of this nature... female students do come to complain that some teachers sexually harass them. We investigate and realise that it is true, but the point is they fear... They don’t want to talk about it. They fear that if they talk about it, either they will be embarrassed, assaulted, side-lined or taken out of the institution.”**

**“There was a time the District Director of Education invited me to speak on issues like this. I sat with the student and discussed with the student that she should be bold. Having narrated my part... we were about to get to the District Education Office to answer questions. Unfortunately, the student had been called by someone superior in society and told them to come and deny all those things and say they were set up... When we got back. I was ashamed that that was the result. I was just trying to find a lasting solution to issues like this.”**

In the same vein, the University of Ghana’s handling of the S4G scandal exemplifies

typical institutional responses that aim to sanitise their image to the detriment of employing transformative action to tackle sexual harassment. Following the airing of the documentary, the University of Ghana issued a press release condemning the act. It was not until January the following year that the implicated lecturers were suspended after the committee’s findings<sup>75</sup>.

This contrasts with Foursquare Church and the University of Lagos in Nigeria, who were swift to openly condemn and suspend their involved members<sup>76</sup>. Additionally, the Nigerian Senate proposed a bill to tackle sexual harassment in tertiary institutions<sup>77</sup>. At best, the proposed legislation can be described as performative or unnecessary (due to existing legal frameworks) because only rigorous and stiff anti-sexual violence stances are crucial to making long-lasting change.

Beyond abysmal responsive strategy, in Ghana, as fate would have it, the airing of this documentary was preceded by a nationwide protest against the introduction of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into the national curriculum<sup>78</sup>. Drawing from its name, this addition into the curriculum was intended to provide age-appropriate and context-specific education on sex, sexuality and society<sup>79</sup>. This proposition by

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75. University of Ghana. (2019). News Release Re: BBC Documentary ‘Sex For Grades’ Undercover In West African Universities [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.ug.edu.gh/news/news-release-re-bbc-documentary-%E2%80%98sex-for-grades%E2%80%99-undercover-west-african-universities>

76. Kokutse, F. (2020). University suspends ‘sex-for-grades’ staff for 4, 6 months Retrieved from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200218135226736>.

77. *ibid.*



a UNESCO and UNFPA intervention fell through because of consensus among opinion leaders that believe that CSE was intended to introduce outlawed homosexuality into Ghana<sup>80</sup>. This culture of silence that is fuelled by people in authority who make sex and sexuality in Africa taboo, and means that young people lack the space and language to confront issues like sexual violation<sup>81</sup>.

## Conclusion

The paper explored sexual violence facts that are grounded in critical feminist theories. These facts, I argue, centre the lived realities of victims-survivors and vulnerable persons to identify with their experiences. I achieved this by exploring the principles of critical feminist scholars and their critique of hegemonic socio-cultural norms and beliefs that are reinforced through institutions, particularly academia, law enforcement, criminal justice systems, religious establishments, and family units. This paper is important because it sets the tone to contextualise fictional narratives around sexual violence.

In theorising feminist theories as facts, I examine online discourse that opposes mainstream

sexual violence discourse. It does this by critically analysing facts employed in practice and in academia that influence policy and interventions central to the lived experiences of victims and survivors of sexual violence. It first discussed the politics of facts and credibility to argue that anti-feminists discredit proven facts (like the influence of patriarchal violence, inefficiencies of prevention and response strategies) to exert dominance and maintain control over victims. Next, it explores these socio-cultural norms and institutional responses to sexual violence in detail to support this argument.

In conclusion, eradicating sexual violence is linked to gender equality and maintaining peace and order globally, including both national and local levels. The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of the framings of online narratives on sexual violence in Ghana and its implications for feminist advocates. This study demonstrates the importance of urgently dismantling patriarchal attitudes, beliefs, and norms and establishing vital approaches to achieve this. Therefore, it is crucial that stakeholders, including community leaders, activists, national and transnational bodies, collaborate with advocates in the offline and online public sphere to design robust prevention and response measures that focus

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79. UNFPA. (2016). Comprehensive sexuality education. Retrieved from [shorturl.at/swB15](http://shorturl.at/swB15)

80. Africanews. (2019). Here's why Ghana's sex education program is controversial. Retrieved from <https://www.africanews.com/2019/10/03/here-s-why-ghana-s-sex-education-program-is-controversial/>

81. Awusabo-Asare, K., Stillman, M., Keogh, S., Doku, D. T., Kumi-Kyereme, A., Esia-Donkoh, K., . . . Bankole, A. (2017). From paper to practice: Sexuality education policies and their implementation in Ghana. New York: Guttmacher Institute.



on victims and persons vulnerable to sexual violence. Generally, this study contributes to understanding digital feminist activism and sexual violence, specific to Ghana, and emphasises the need for radical social change.



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# The Culture of Terrorising Outspoken Women in South Sudan

by Aluel Atem

## Abstract

South Sudan is a context, where most cultures reward women for their silence. Speaking up and speaking out shakes the status quo in unimaginable ways. When we pay critical attention, South Sudanese women in the communities that they exist in speak highly of their ability to selflessly serve and care silently; this is one thing that remains constant in all the narratives. The societal conditioning that cherishes the silences of young girls often happens, consciously and unconsciously, from a very young age. The romanticisation of silence has for centuries contributed to the entitlement to women's bodies, abuse and lack of accountability (Solnit, 2017). Freedom of expression and opinion is one of the thirty basic human rights but is the most expensive human right for women, especially those forced into silence. (Nations, 2021). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the price that South Sudanese women pay for simply speaking out. It will also highlight the challenges women experience in their families and in public spaces, including social media platforms, and will explore some of the ways that they are continuing to be intentional about speaking out or staying silent.

## Research Questions

1. What have your experiences been as one of the most outspoken women?
2. What have been your challenges both in your families and in the public?
3. What are some of the strategies that have enabled you to continue to speak out despite all the challenges?



## Research Methodology

This paper used qualitative data collection methods to document the reflections of five outspoken young South Sudanese women. The reflections of these phenomenal women were collected through direct calls and WhatsApp voice messaging. The interviewees were identified based on their noticeable fight for women and girls' rights, their track record of speaking out on various issues, and the fact that they come from different backgrounds and geographical locations: Greater Upper Nile, Greater Equatoria and Greater Bahr el Ghazal.

## Literature Review

Feminist theories and literature continue to be deeply rooted in the principle that speaking up is a form of agency for women. Globally, the continuous erasure of women's experiences or perspectives in research and documentation is still a reality (Devault, 1999). It is the same when it comes to women's contributions and voices in innovations, decision making spaces, processes and in public life (Romeo, 2021). The exclusion of South Sudanese women, like everywhere else in the world, is systemic and well structured. For a group of people who experienced decades of marginalisation, South Sudanese have fought to defend their existence and humanity from the government of Sudan, which was predominantly Islamic. Due to decades of struggle, invisibility is something millions of South Sudanese can identify with.

When Southern Sudanese were discriminated against because of their identity, they were a series of uprisings and rebellions from Anyanya 1 in the 1950s (Malwal, 2015) to Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army

(SPLM/A) in the 1980s that eventually led to South Sudan's independence. There are many living testimonies of Southern Sudanese, who collectively understood that they needed freedom, and therefore fought tirelessly for it. South Sudanese women brought their whole selves to the liberation struggle and performed roles beyond gendered societal expectations. They joined the military, formed a battalion in hopes to actively participate but were rather discriminated against. Their voices and contributions were undermined, and they were reduced to their reproductive roles (Jok, 1999).

Today, their contributions at the frontlines of the liberation struggle are slowly getting erased in South Sudan's liberation narrative. Besides their role in the army, women played an active role in peace processes, and facilitated, negotiated, and mediated conflicts in different capacities (Soma, 2020). When men took on their role in the frontlines, women took on supportive roles and held their families and communities together. All this evidence shows that South Sudanese women have never been silent. They have always exercised their voice and agency in different ways. Even when they were silent, they fought. Jane L Parpart beautifully states that "silence can be a crucial survival strategy, a source of comfort, and an effective mechanism for dealing with hostile and dangerous environments". That "silence can provide room for agency in the face of threats as it enables 'victims' to choose between acceptable speech and the unsayable" (Parpart, 2017). Vocal South Sudanese women who speak out on either abuse, or unapologetically occupy space or simply dare to freely exist are stigmatised, humiliated, harassed, abused and in some cases, they are murdered to silence them.



## Analysis/Discussion

### *The Horrors of Women Utilising Their Voices*

The experiences of the five South Sudanese women interviewed for this paper is not far from the global realities of the 86% of 3232 women. Globally, women reported experiences of being bullied and harassed at the workplace in the survey on women at workplace, which was administered digitally by HRhelpdesk in 2017 (HRhelpdesk, 2017). An important factor about the harassment of vocal women in South Sudan is that it is done in so many ways with the sole purpose of putting those women “back to their place”. Bullying, name-calling, and descriptions like angry, bitter, sad, lonely, or single women become their imposed identities.

For some, the intersection of different social identities, especially being a woman and young, comes at an additional cost. “In physical spaces, being young has been a challenge, you are too young to be asking questions older women can’t dare to ask”, while for others being vocal resulted in people undermining and questioning their “professionalism”. (HRhelpdesk, 2017). Basically, this introduces the concept of ‘respectability politics’, which is defined as “what happens when minority and/or marginalised groups are told (or teach themselves) that in order to receive better treatment from the group in power, they must behave better.” This is a term first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book “Righteous Discontent” (Higginbotham, 2018). The expectation that marginalised groups, especially women who speak up, should behave or act in a certain way to gain respect from groups in power is not any different online (Mikaela Pitcan, 2018).

The harassment is also not only happening at the workplace or on the streets but starts at the level of the family, where women’s voices and opinions are policed. In families, women who speak up are constantly accused of ruining the family’s ‘reputation’ because a good woman or girl is raised to know when and how to speak in any given context, especially in public.

**“It becomes very hard, if anything is happening in South Sudan, any demonstration, any civic related activity in the country, you find that my inbox is flooded or I am being called, there is always a family meeting, everyone coming in to warn me of how I should not be part of it and its dangerous, and especially if you come from a background with family members who are politicians then they say you are putting their lives at risk”** one of the women shared.

In addition to dealing with all that in-person. The harassment and abuse online is equally devastating for these vocal women, who utilise social media platforms (Report, 2015). Speaking out results in receiving rape threats, getting constantly trolled, being stalked, getting accused of “importing” western ideas which are all methods used to simply delegitimize these women’s voices, concerns, and efforts. “You notice people who are always there to contradict your views, sometimes you think it’s clout chasing but then you begin to understand the pattern and realise that it’s actually a strategy” one woman shared.

**“Being marked as someone people want to deliberately dismiss because they fear how powerful my statements and**



**assertions are, for others, it seems to shine too bright that it shadows them if they are fellow women”** another woman echoed.

**“Overtime as my following and audience grew, especially on radio and then digital, the more I’ve received backlash for comments or statements I make. It is overwhelming and extremely hurtful at times. It gets repetitive and develops personal hate to where I feel threatened at one point or the other”** the 3rd woman added. These experiences show that the abuse of women online is strategic, systemic, and structural. It stems from already existing patriarchal structures (Woodlock, 2017).

**“We see voices being silenced on Twitter every day. We’ve been working to counteract this for the past 2 years. We prioritised this in 2016. We updated our policies and increased the size of our teams. It wasn’t enough.”**

commented Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter, on the attempts made to protect people on social media. (International, 2018). This just confirms that there are no effective policies, laws or structures in place to effectively protect women from online violence on these social media platforms.

The #MeToo Movement encouraged survivors of sexual violence to speak out and has contributed to a cultural shift around breaking the silence, and believing survivors worldwide (Movement, 2006). However, harassment and

abuse are particularly worse for women who speak up about any form of abuse they have experienced or are experiencing. When a few brave young South Sudanese women in the diaspora broke the silence on sexual abuse amongst South Sudanese communities in June 2021, the hashtag #SouthSudaneseSurvivor blew up in just a day on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. There were countless numbers of women sharing all kinds of painful stories of sexual violence. One would think that this would alarm society and create an opportunity for South Sudanese to see that there is a problem. Instead, these survivors were questioned, victim-blamed, mocked and harassed.

Another case that shows the kind of backlash that women experience for speaking up involves prominent South Sudanese singer Dinganyai’s wife, who used Facebook live to share the kind of domestic abuse she was undergoing and her fight for her children’s custody. Because South Sudan is not used to victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) speaking out, Dinganyai ended up playing the victim. Instead, he composed a song responding to all the women who ‘supported’ his wife, and this song ended up being played almost everywhere. (Juba, 2020) There are endless cases of girls being murdered by their family members for either getting pregnant to men the family doesn’t approve of (Akol, 2020) or for simply speaking up against forced marriages (Malak, 2019). Society always tries to justify why such women, unlike other victims of violence, deserve the consequences. As much as technological advancement and the expansion of digital platforms has been advantageous to the feminist movement, these platforms



have also enabled some men to gain access to women they would not ordinarily have access to or even have the chance to abuse in-person (Neema Iyer, 2020).

### ***When Speaking Up is the Only Choice***

Speaking up when silence is the preferred mode results in being penalised. In 'professional' settings, it affects the confidence of women and how they are perceived, which is enough to cost them their jobs (Rueckert, 2020). When the issue they choose to speak up about is more personal, and perhaps an experience of harassment at the workplace, other women bear the brunt of possibly not getting hired by male bosses who want to avoid being 'accused' of sexual harassment (Bower, 2019).

Women are not the problem, as they have always spoken up, but their voices have been simply ignored in the system of patriarchy (Marcus, 2021). When your voice has historically been ignored, or constantly spoken over, it is therefore not surprising that taking the backseat becomes the default stand for most women (Alexander, 2017). This explains why women feel the need to put in extra work and feel the need to build their confidence to be knowledgeable about what they feel and about certain issues. When asked how she continues to speak up despite all the backlash, one of the women responded that

***“I am authentic and I strive to be as authentic as possible in my pursuits, I do not know a better way to live as a human being than to be authentic”.***

She continues to add that

***“I try to know my stuff so by the time I go out there to make a statement, to speak about something, if it’s an assertion, I have done my homework most of the times so it has to be something that I am sure about and I know what I am saying, I want to speak with authority because also challenging patriarchal norms requires one to speak with authority and feminists have to do that a lot on a daily basis so I make sure that I know my stuff and seek as much knowledge on the subject that I am speaking about as possible”.***

The women who came before us fought tirelessly for our right to speak up, how then can we afford to remain silent? (Sulaiman). There is a generational responsibility of wanting to leave the world better than the generation that one finds themselves in. In terms of bridging the equality gap, this generational responsibility is one of the main drivers pushing these women to remain vocal. Knowing that every effort is a building block towards equality drives them. One of the women powerfully articulated that Self-awareness, especially of one's privilege and power, manifests and interacts at an individual and institutional level. This is one of the key African feminist principles. (Members, 2006). Black and African feminists' main critiques of white feminism stems from white women's inability to challenge white supremacy as a structure that they benefit from, and their inability to see the diverse experiences of women (Beck, 2021).

Developing a thick skin becomes a necessity when one is constantly fighting for their humanity. It gets to a point where politeness is not even an option anymore and it literally graduates to a full blown 'I don't give a fuck'



attitude (Eltahawy, 2019). Given the conditioning of women and girls to pander to patriarchy, it takes a certain feminist consciousness to choose to disengage, block out trolls or really go all the way down with them especially online (Ahumuza, 2021). This is one of the strategies that these vocal South Sudanese women apply to make it through each day, facing the backlash head on and calling out misogynists.

**“Comparing the 2016 and 2021 South Sudan, especially digitally, I see slow but gradual change and a shift in mindset. As much as the numbers in negativity have grown, the numbers of voices who are committed to achieve an equal rights South Sudan have doubled, maybe tripled. We’ve managed to introduce feminism and have opened spaces and platforms that are safe for women to explore/ know themselves and their rights”**

Said by one of the women. One of the main things that has enabled them to effectively utilise the online space has been building community and networks of women, which create a safety net that they can land on whenever it gets rough. It’s easy to single out an individual, but harder to crack a community. Sisterhood, collective action and solidarity remain core principles of feminism (Sweetman, 2013)

In conclusion, South Sudan is an extremely patriarchal society. The history of this young country is told from a patriarchal lens, often omitting the role women played in the liberation struggle and the roles that they continue to play in the nation building process. The few stories told about women and girls are often told from a purely ‘victimhood narrative’ and are usually told by others. This narrative often portrays

South Sudanese women and girls as ‘voiceless’, and in need of ‘speaking for and or saving’. This takes away their agency, autonomy, and authority. There has never been a point where South Sudanese women were voiceless; they have always spoken up and resisted in ways that worked best for them in the given context. The notion of ‘giving South Sudanese women a voice’ or being ‘a voice for the voiceless’ continues to be perpetuated by both international and national women’s rights institutions, and is further reinforced by media narratives (Mednick, 2018). The statement “we are not our ancestors” used by some of the Black Lives Matter movement activists, organisers and corporate brands received a backlash from the Black community in the West. Several people came out to point out how disrespectful the statement is (Owens, 2018). I see the same narrative used by some young South Sudanese women who believe that “we are not our mothers” to insinuate that our mothers silently accepted to be oppressed. This completely erases the efforts of the women who did most of the hard groundwork for this generation of women, so that they can speak and amplify each other’s voices.

The difference between this generation of women and the South Sudanese women who came before us is that there is more access to tools, resources, and a little bit more stability in terms of security. Women of this generation have an opportunity to document and digitise their voices, and narratives. In this context, part of South Sudanese young women’s generational responsibility and resistance should include documenting and digitising the stories, narratives and wins of the women who came before us, in addition to their own.

Therefore, projects like “No Time to Mourn”, an anthology by South Sudanese women



(Twongyeirwe, 2020), and Gender Talk 21, a radical African feminist traditional and multimedia platform, aim to build a global South Sudanese feminist community. These projects amplify South Sudanese feminist voices and contribute to South Sudanese feminist knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, and production that seeks to establish a digital South Sudanese feminist archive. (Gender Talk 211, 2020) Recently, 'Heroines Unspoken Tales', became a digital platform that amplifies, documents and shares the journeys and stories of women through art and creativity. This is so essential for documenting South Sudanese women's movement history. (Tales, 2021). For it is not enough to simply speak up, South Sudanese women must document their resistance, produce their knowledge, and continue to learn from herstories narrated and written by them.

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# The Fairness of our Tax System will Determine if we can Address Gender and Other Social Inequalities in Africa

by Leah Eryenyu

There's a lie that has been told, repeatedly, about Africa to the point that it has become the truth. Reinforced through photos of starving babies, movies about warlords and blood diamonds, human rights and development reports, and the narrative of Africa's perpetual poverty and irredeemable corruption has captured the public imagination. It has become a fact that we accept - without question. What we have come to believe is that we deserve our poverty because it is within our nature. We have come to believe that we are poor because we are lazy and unintelligent. What a convenient untruth!

The version of the story that I know is markedly different. That story includes chapters of active exploitation and underdevelopment of Africa by European colonialists, the continued underdevelopment of the continent through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These financial institutions mandated structural adjustment programmes that hollowed funding for public services, and more recently, there is evidence of the

continued theft of Africa's resources through unfair trade and tax policies.

Africa now loses nearly \$90 billion in illicit financial flows annually, which are carted off to other parts of the world. Simply put, illicit financial flows are resources that are earned, transferred, or used illegally. They can include proceeds from criminal activities like drug trafficking and money laundering, income from corruption, profits from commercial practices like tax evasion and avoidance. While it is true that Africa has a corruption problem, it is also true that there is a bigger tax abuse problem that benefits the wealthy elite and Global North countries, who then turn around to support us with aid. So, here's the rub, Africa gets only about \$49 billion in official development assistance every year, yet every instance of aid that is received is splashed on newspapers and other media outlets. This occurs while about twice that amount of money is lost every year by the same group of people, without receiving any coverage at all.



The question then becomes; in whose interests does it serve when Africa is forever casted as poor? When you are poor, you are structurally stripped of your power. Without power, exploitation and political interference can continue with impunity. Nothing provides a better testament to this than the current debacle on vaccines. Because we are poor, our ability to negotiate for vaccines has been weakened. Instead, we must rely on the benevolence of rich countries to access vaccines who use this as an opportunity to further entrench the narrative of our ineptitude, and their saviourism.

The loss of African resources should therefore be concerning to us all. Every penny that we lose comes at a cost. That cost can manifest as reduced funding for public services such as health, education and social infrastructure, increased reliance on debt to finance government programmes, and lastly a regressive tax system that transfers the burden of taxation to an already overstretched and poor tax base. All these policies hit poor people and other marginalised groups the hardest. Women, who rely on public services the most because of the discrepancies in income and are most likely to be unemployed or laid off during a crisis compared to men. The pandemic has made this a stark reality. While the majority of the world's workers lost US\$3.7 trillion in income, women bore the brunt of it with their losses being comparable to the combined wealth of 98 countries, according

to a 2021 OXFAM report. This gendered income inequality has been shown to have impacted social welfare outcomes, and access to and the enjoyment of civil liberties.

And yet, a fairer tax system could be the first step in addressing these injustices. Data shows that the biggest chunk of money that the continent haemorrhages is lost through tax evasion and avoidance. A fairer tax system uses tax not just as a vehicle for resource mobilisation to fund public goods, but also for redistribution of wealth and opportunities, and also to address social and economic inequalities. This system is aware of differential inequalities, and how neutral policies can become unfair in practice. Unfair tax policies exacerbate illicit financial flows by creating loopholes that allow those who are already wealthy to pay as little tax as possible, while the rest of us must pay what is required. In essence the world's wealthiest are not rich because they work the hardest, but because they have the resources for aggressive tax planning - a fancy term used to obscure tax dodging. This unfairness is felt deeply because the poorer person is still unlikely to access the public services that the taxes will fund.

Addressing illicit financial flows by closing significant gaps in our tax system is therefore an imperative. This change needs to happen at the level of national level policy and practice, but also requires the political will of other nations.



Together, nations can collectively develop international tax policy that sets norms and standards domestically. If we do not deal with the problem of unfair taxation, gender, and other social inequalities that are inextricably linked to access, control and ownership of

resources will then continue the untruth of Africa's impoverishment. We must first start by acknowledging and documenting the loss of resources from Africa through illicit financial flows. Once we name it, we can track it and then build solidarity to stop it.



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# Why we Need More Feminist Leaders to Dismantle the Capitalist System and Create Real Change

by Amanda Marufu

## Abstract

Each year the World Economic Forum publishes the Global Gender Gap Report, giving us much needed data and analysis. This report outlines where gender equality works and looks into countries who are working the hardest to achieve it. Often, we discuss and dissect all the issues and injustices without taking stock of the changes we are fighting for. The report appreciates the countries that have successfully closed the gap by 88%, and details how exactly they have enacted such sustainable change. This essay seeks to analyse countries that are on the road to achieving gender equality, with a specific focus on Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates. Taking stock of what got these countries to the top 5 positions, I seek to answer the question of whether the way that gender equality has been framed works. This paper also explores whether having more women in leadership and political positions has an impact on other issues that affect women. The laws and policies that have been put into place to close the gender gap will be highlighted, as will the opportunities and challenges that come with replicating these laws and policies in other countries in Africa.

## Key words

*Gender equality, Women in leadership, Closing the gender gap*



## Introduction

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the World Economic Forum states that the timeline of closing the global gender gap has increased by a generation, from 99.5 years to 135.6 years. This brings to question how these countries who are at the top of this list have managed to continue their upwards trajectory towards closing the gap, and what exactly a gender equal world looks like.

According to UN Women, Only four countries have 50 per cent or more women in parliament, in both single or lower houses. Rwanda has 61%, Cuba has 53%, Bolivia has 53%, and the United Arab Emirates has 50 % representation in parliament. These are great achievements for political participation in these countries and this paper will investigate what has influenced them.

While Rwanda stays consistently high on both fronts. As of this year, the United Arab Emirates is ranked 72 of 153 countries on the global gender gap report. In 2020, it ranked 120. This brings into question whether quotas do in fact work, or whether they are merely a necessary start for achieving greater gender equality. A closer look at Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates provide clarity on these matters.

## Do quotas work?

Quotas are a great way to achieve economic equality, but do the changes trickle down to other aspects of daily life and basic human rights?

In 2014, the UAE made headlines for ranking first in the world for treating women with respect. Whilst concurrently trending for numerous human rights violations, the state's mandate for 50/50 women representation in politics and leadership positions saw the country flourish and grow economically.

Legally, women in the UAE receive equal pay for equal work. Two thirds of public sector jobs are held by women with women making up 40% of the entire workforce. Women business owners form 10% of the private sector. 30% of the property in Dubai is owned by women. Literacy rates for both men and women are above 95%, with women making up about 70% of all university graduates. Millions of women participate in elections and healthcare for women is widely accessible. Pregnant women are guaranteed paid leave, but despite all this there are still multiple problems within the state and their laws.

In most cases, women can only have access to these rights if their guardian permits it. Women over the age of 18 must get permission from their guardian, usually their father or husband, to travel or marry. Domestic violence goes largely unreported and is not protected by one anti-domestic violence legislation. Instead, domestic violence cases draw from other legislations to protect the victim/survivor and enable women to get a divorce and custody of one's children. Children who have achieved puberty, but are still under the age of 18, can also be married off with the approval of a judge.

We see similar trends within the realities of women in Rwanda, where the laws and lived realities of women do not measure up. While



in the UAE there has been a rise in feminist organizations and individuals fighting for women's rights, in Rwandan the word feminist itself is considered unpatriotic. Although Rwandese women occupy some power through political positions, their work lives often do not mirror their position within the home.

After the genocide, it was discovered that to rebuild the country it would be essential that both men and women become part of the workforce. Laws and policies were put in place to promote the role of women in economic development and politics.

As a result of the conflict, a large portion of the lives lost in war created a need for women to leave the household and enter the workforce. Unlike in many parts of the world where the men returned after war and occupied political positions, Rwandese women have managed to remain an integral part of achieving the economic goals of the country.

The reality, and often a huge oversight, is that Rwandese women's perceived usefulness to the economy does not challenge the capitalist system, but rather upholds and perpetuates it. By not addressing capitalism as a structural problem, both men and women are not treated as people, but as labour. They are treated and seen as disposable bodies who are added to the workforce, worked to the limit, and then are replaced by other people who are also stuck within the capitalist machine when death occurs.

Burnet (2011) in a journal entry titled; ***Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment***

***in Rwanda'*** states that, **“the high political representation of women in parliament has not translated into legislative gains for women; women parliamentarians toe the party line, rarely mobilise around ‘women’s issues’ and in some cases vote for legislation that reduces legal protection for women or eliminates women-friendly policies.”**

She argues, however, that **“the high political representation of women has at least a symbolic value and has increased respect for some women and has given them greater voice in the family and community, greater autonomy in family decision-making and greater access to education. Nevertheless, for most women living in rural areas little has changed.”**

## **The question of whether equality works?**

The goal of achieving equality can only exist in a world where discrimination no longer exists. This includes discrimination based on sex, gender, race, disabilities, and class. The driving force behind putting more women in leadership positions within these countries has been that there is money to gain through investing in women. The huge push towards the economic gains that can be achieved by including women has meant that any structural policies, laws and change that can improve the lives of women, such as fighting for substantive gender equality have been put on the back burner entirely. The lack of involvement of women at a grassroots level, and the focus on economic growth has



meant that real equality, that shifts gender roles, is a goal that both countries are far from achieving.

With the reality of the lack of feminists in some of these political spaces, it's important to note, as fellow writer, Angel Nduka-Nwosu said,

**“the action of standing for women’s rights is what gives the feminist label its credibility, more so than the word itself.”**

### **Should this be replicated across the African continent?**

Both countries are led by dictatorships. Whilst decisions to include women in politics have been made and have yielded results, the bulk of the political and economic choices lie are made by one person - the President. Therefore, the gains in economic growth and political participation are hard to replicate, without also replicating the same systems of governance.

This system, because it falls short of being inclusive and life changing, has only ensured that oppression and systemic violence continue. Without a clear map of structural change and what dismantling of gender roles looks like, people are forced to exist in a ‘non-feminist limbo’ that offers no clear path forward towards gender equality.

Even though no structural change has happened, it is hard to ignore the changes and improvements that have been made. These changes include the development of infrastructure and the economy because of women’s involvement in leadership. The two

countries in this analysis have also seen massive growth within their industries, with Rwanda placing significant emphasis on technology and agriculture. This has created jobs and opportunities within the country that did not exist before and has created a rise in ownership and business acumen.

In this regard gender quotas, and involving women, has provided us with a road map that outlines the types of changes that we can expect to see should we include women in business and invest in more women entrepreneurs and enterprises, but this does not provide us with the full picture. Capitalism and patriarchy are still at play, and women’s lived realities are impacted by them, despite certain progress such as closing the gap or economic empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

A capitalist system prioritises power, capitalist gain and money, and cannot exist hand in hand with basic human rights. While there has been a huge drive to showcase how women can be useful drivers for the growth of the economy, little has been done to improve the daily lives of women at grassroots level.

In terms of leadership, there is evidence that shows the positive impact of women’s leadership on political participation and economic growth. Globally, women’s rights agenda’s still focus on women’s leadership, but these debates and dialogues have become redundant. It is long past the time to be arguing that women can lead, instead the task is now ensuring that the right women are in power to create long lasting systemic change.

We do not need more women in leadership



positions. Putting more women in leadership positions does not automatically mean that feminism is at the forefront of their struggle. Instead, the structures that they inherit are capitalism and patriarchy. Without changing the structures and vehicles of power, it simply means women are guided by those same problematic structures in their leadership.

Rather, we need more feminists in leadership positions. We need more people who are willing to lead feminist movements, including all sexes and genders, and more people who are willing to enact change at grassroots levels. There is also an urgent need for feminist education for everyone. Without a clear strategic and structural plan, that requires feminist education and consciousness, political change cannot happen. Building a more feminist and egalitarian world is, therefore, critical and part of transforming society and oppressive structures.

In the words of Finn Macky, **“There is so much wrong with the present system that we can’t just tinker around the edges, we need to start again; our endpoint cannot be equality in an unequal world. This is also the reason why feminism is not struggling to simply reverse the present power relationship and put women in charge instead of men (though this is a common myth about feminist politics). Feminism is about change, not a changing of the guard. If we are to correct our unbalanced world, then we need to get rid of patriarchy as a system of social governance.”**

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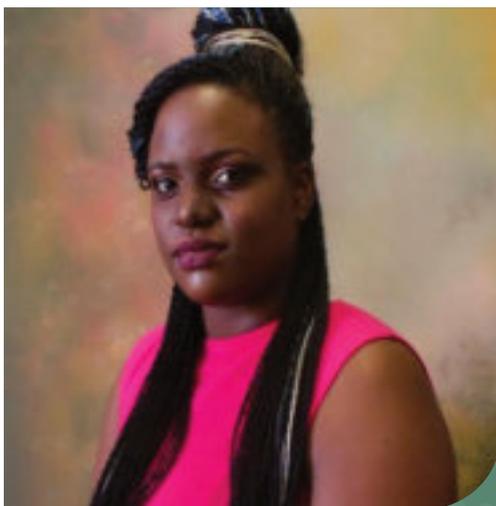
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# This is What a Feminist Budget Looks Like

by Leah Eryenyu

## Abstract

Decisions on the allocation of resources are political decisions that are often influenced by those in power. National budgets serve as the primary tool for the distribution of resources, which involves deciding who gets what and when. Because feminism advocates for redistribution of material, social and political resources for gender justice, this article makes a case for adopting feminist principles in budgeting - particularly to guarantee the right to health. I also argue that a feminist health budget is unachievable without a change in the content and form of the national budget in its totality. Using an intersectional feminist framework, a feminist budget requires a multi-pronged, multi-sectoral approach in order to deal with interlocking structural barriers. I also break down funding priorities within a feminist budget, and what can be done to unlock the resources to achieve a comprehensive feminist budget that protects the right to health.



## Introduction

Put simply, a national budget is the government's high-level plan that details the spending of public resources within a financial year. The national budget is anchored to the country's strategic priorities delineated in the national development plan. A budget estimates the amount of revenue that will be received during the period being budgeted for, either from tax and non-tax revenue, or through borrowing (debt financing), and support from development partners. Allocations are then made to different sectors such as infrastructure, security, health, and education, etc. Generally, health figures are one of the highest priorities for countries and their national budgets because the prosperity of a nation depends on the wellbeing of its people. However, recent data shows that governments are continuously failing to meet the minimum thresholds for health financing (Asante, A., Wasike, W.S.K. & Ataguba, 2020) and even with limited resources, the most marginalised and vulnerable groups are not prioritised. (Tangcharoensathien V., Mills A., Bordia Das M., Patcharanarumo W., Mbuntan M., & Jeffery Johns J., 2018) With all these challenges compounded in national budgets, a feminist health budget could be the surest way to guarantee rights and freedoms through resource allocation.

## What is a Feminist Budget?

Feminism is the act of interrogating power and oppression in all the forms it presents itself, with gender being at the centre of this

analysis. Feminism demands for structural transformation, while underscoring the interests and needs of minoritised people. A feminist health budget, therefore, is one that seeks to address the barriers that impede on the enjoyment of the right to health. A feminist health budget recognises how gender dynamics may not only impede on exercising bodily autonomy, but can also affect access to affordable and quality healthcare. Critically, this budget is also informed by an understanding that different systems of power and oppression collude to further marginalise and deny access for individuals and groups because of their economic status, ability, sexual orientation, HIV status, etc. Therefore, a feminist health budget allocates resources with the main aim of ensuring that, not only does everyone benefit from health resources, but that resources go to the most marginalised first. In looking to address the many facets of injustice in health, a feminist health budget is futile and cannot be fully implemented without the other sections of the budget changing as well. For example, looking into how economic status determines accessibility to health, one cannot address issues of affordability without taking stock of dynamics within the labour market or issues concerned with resource mobilisation. We also cannot ensure reproductive justice when mothers have children, without the availability of publicly funded childcare services to support them in raising children. In short, a feminist health budget is an impossibility without a similar overhaul in the entire national budget. A feminist health budget is only possible with feminist national budget.



## **Principles of a Feminist Health Budget**

### ***People-centred***

It should be responsive to the vast needs of the diversity of people it is in service of, which means it should be pro-poor, gender responsive, disability responsive, etc., and should ensure equity of access based on need, and not ability to pay. Access to quality healthcare should not depend on employment or wealth. If that were the case, women and other minorities who are overrepresented amongst the unemployed would effectively have no right to health.

### ***Publicly funded and delivered***

Health is a public good that should be collectively funded by public resources and made available for everyone. Public funding also reduces the influence of vested interests that may sway resource allocation.

### ***Transparency and accountability***

As a publicly funded entity, transparency, and accountability to ensure responsible resource use is paramount. Transparency allows citizens to provide inputs into the budget process and to assess whether a government has executed the development plans in accordance with

budgetary allocations. (Pekkonen, A. & Malena.C (n.d). In short, the process is democratized, allowing for a diversity of voices to weigh in, in line with feminist principles of meaningful participation.

### ***Reduces inequalities***

Inequities in health impact the quality of life. For example, stunting in children, which is caused by poor nutrition and poverty in early childhood development, has a ripple effect on poor health or poor education outcomes resulting in lower wages later in life. Addressing the underlying social and economic determinants that block access to health is therefore critical in ensuring inclusive growth for everyone.

### ***Health as a human right***

Health should not be instrumentalised in service of human capital development to produce workers for development of the economy. Health and wellness should be a legitimate and worthy end goal.

### ***Uphold bodily autonomy and integrity***

Resource allocation should be responsive to decisions individuals and groups make about their bodies; and should not be withheld based on ideological differences, for example the use of contraceptives.



## **What Would Be the Priority Areas for Funding in a Feminist Budget?**

What would a feminist health budget fund and what would some of its priority areas be? If there is an agreement with the World Health Organization's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity," then the following proposals for funding are in keeping with global standards of health and wellbeing:

### **Social Infrastructure of Caregiving Work**

Women are overburdened with caregiving work, including caring for the sick. They are the ones expected to skip work to look after a sick child and are also stereotypically seen as best suited to provide palliative care. Women responded to this responsibility during the HIV/AIDS pandemic and now they are filling up the ranks of carers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women are being expected to nurse COVID-19 patients back to health at home, while also serving as tutors and overseeing homework. Remunerating women for their labour is therefore a priority if we are to address the historical inequalities that women continue to face, within and outside the health sector. This investment must be intertwined with funding for childcare and early childhood development, giving women room to find decent work in the labour market. This will ensure the health and wellbeing of both women and children and shows a commitment to holistic care, a type of care that goes beyond care for women before and during pregnancy.

### ***Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)***

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, VAWG has become a crisis with unprecedented levels of sexual violence and intimate partner violence recorded. And yet the responsibility of a comprehensive response to VAWG keeps getting passed around. Is it under the ambit of the ministry in charge of women affairs, the police, or is it health? VAWG is a public health and gender issue, and it requires a multifaceted approach to address it. All these organs therefore have a part to play and must work in collaboration. A feminist health budget must allocate funding for emergency medical care when women are physically hurt and should also avail resources for forensic investigations and psychosocial support, as well as resources for the construction and running of domestic violence shelters. Above all, we need a well-resourced referral pathway that does not re-victimise or re-traumatise victims or survivors but provides the right support and protection for women and girls to start healing.

### ***Social Protection***

Social protection interventions address the risks and vulnerabilities that expose individuals to income insecurity, and social deprivation that hampers dignity and wellbeing. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), social protection includes benefits for children and families, for maternity, unemployment, employment injury, sickness, old age, disability, and for survivors, and overall health protection (ILO, 2017). Publicly funded national health insurance schemes are a form of social protection that equalises access to healthcare for all and absorbs the shocks of what would have been significant healthcare costs. Funding



this would ensure that the overall well-being of people and marginalised groups remains intact, even in moments of crisis.

### ***Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)***

The criticality of making funding available for maternal health in a feminist budget is obvious, given the high rates of maternal mortality in Africa. However, other SRHR issues that go beyond pregnancy and its attendant needs are often forgotten. SRHR encompasses sexual health, reproductive health, sexual rights, and reproductive rights, which all have legitimacy and lead to massive consequences if neglected. Funding for access to SRHR services and information through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is crucial, so that people can make informed choices. Relatedly, funding for SRHR commodities like condoms and other contraceptives is equally important. Resources must not be weaponised to police and penalise choices over contested issues like abortion but should instead be used to guarantee health for everyone, no matter who they are and where they are located in society.

### ***Menstrual Health and Hygiene***

Menstrual health and hygiene encompasses both menstrual hygiene management and the broader systemic factors that link menstruation with health, well-being, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment, and rights. (UNICEF, 2019). Although menstruation is a normal and natural part of the reproductive system, 500 million women and girls globally face constraints in their needs to manage their menstruation well, (FSG, 2020) creating further

impediments to their participation in private and public life. Allocation of resources for quality menstrual products, information about menstruation, safe and well-managed Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure and services that influence households, school, work, and public life should be indisputable.

### ***Mental Health***

Holistic investment in health means that the state of our mental health should be of concern as well. Disorders affecting mental health are highly prevalent, can be disabling, and are associated with substantial premature mortality. Yet national health system responses are frequently under-resourced, inefficient, and ineffective, leading to an imbalance between disease burden and health expenditures (Vigo, D. V., Kestel, D., Pendakur, K., Thornicroft, G., & Atun, R. (2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated this with untold deaths, job losses and prolonged isolation due to lockdowns, undergirds the criticality of this investment.

### ***Increase Remuneration and Care of Health Workers and Invest in Training to Respond to the Diversity of Health Needs***

Healthcare workers, particularly nurses and midwives, are often invisible in discourse over remuneration and a living wage, until something goes awfully wrong. To ensure an inclusive and safe health system, where people can access services without judgement, training for health personnel needs to go beyond advancing technical knowledge but should rather aim to change the attitudes of health workers.



### ***Invest in Disaggregated and Intersectional Data to Inform Decision Making***

People are not a monolith. Therefore, health issues cannot be solved with broad strokes. Data currently makes certain groups and issues invisible because dominant groups with power are typically used as the default place to begin analysis and to make decisions. This means that the needs of many others fall through the cracks and are not funded. Evidence used for funding should consider the diversity of health issues that emerge because of the diversity of people's identities and experiences.

With these priorities budgeted and funded, the benefits of a feminist health budget become obvious. In her seminal essay 'Under Western Eyes', feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) urges us to read up the ladder of privilege. "If we pay attention to and think from the space of some of the most disenfranchised communities of women in the world, we are most likely to envision a just and democratic society capable of treating all its citizens fairly. Conversely, if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges." If we centre the most vulnerable as we plan, everyone automatically gets taken care of. The benefit of a feminist health budget is as simple as that. Everyone benefits because the system needs to change to cater to the needs of everyone. In effect, no one gets left behind.

### ***Where is the money for a feminist health budget?***

The laundry list of priorities for funding look like wishful thinking when juxtaposed with constrained and heavily indebted economies

across Africa. Where will the resources to fund this budget come from, and what needs to change to achieve this? These recommendations, shared in other spaces by feminists, activists, and trade unionists, may provide some solutions. Undergirding all these proposals is the need for political will from all decision makers, which requires a significant shift in mindset and requires a robust movement for accountability and transformation.

### ***Increase Domestic Resource Mobilisation, and Ensure Inclusive, Transparent, and Accountable Appropriation of Resources***

Increasing the resource envelope to fund health and other social and economic programmes is the most critical and urgent task facing governments. This shall entail increasing the tax base while being cognisant of the disparate impacts of taxation on minoritized groups, especially women. Resources from tax revenue should target high net worth individuals and wealth funds instead of consumption goods through value added tax, which is usually the case for many. Relatedly, governments need to stop the loss of resources through illicit financial flows which cost Africa about US\$ 89 billion annually because of tax evasion, avoidance and corruption. (UNCTAD, 2020) This requires concerted efforts between national governments and the international community as this is a transnational issue. The issue of debt financing must be addressed as governments are now saddled with debt, which distorts priorities and takes away critical resources for human capital development. Lastly the resource envelope must be used appropriately and should be allocated to the sectors in need of resourcing, one of which is health.



### ***Stop the Rapid Commercialisation and Privatisation of Health***

With the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) of the 1980s and 1990s, reduction of government spending on public services resulted in diminished investments into health. This paved the way for the private sector to dominate and set norms around healthcare. Private healthcare has continued to expand, which in turn has lessened the importance of health as an urgent and indispensable public service that the state is primarily responsible for. This proliferation of private healthcare is also supported by WB and IMF policies, which have continued to prioritise private facilities through availing financing from the International Finance Corporation and by promoting public-private partnerships as the standard for health financing (Romero, M-J. 2015), (Wemos, 2021). International financial institutions must be pressured by governments, and social justice movements, to withdraw these policies and promote an approach that puts the public first.

### ***Reroute resources to human capital development and gender justice***

The Maputo Protocol, the premier women's rights instrument on the continent, explicitly requests member states to reduce military spending and to re-allocate resources to social services that benefit women. In a highly securitised world where conflict justifies military action, police and military budgets have swelled at the expense of public services for human capital development. Many budgets are drained by excessive foreign trips by legislators, excessive

sitting allowances and personal vehicles purchased with taxpayers' money, etc, but yield no tangible value. Furthermore, Auditors General's reports have recorded many instances of funds being returned to the consolidated fund due to underspending. It is time to review wasteful expenditure and to reroute it to where it is needed the most: in health, education, public housing, social protection, public transport, and public day-cares, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Issues of health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to resource allocation and economic wellbeing. If the health system itself must change, then the budget process is a good first step in ensuring transformation and redressing structural inequalities that enables everyone to thrive.

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# Seeking Synergies

## *Understanding the Evidence that Links Feminism and SRHR for African Women*

by Oluwatobiloba Ayodele

### **Abstract**

Continuous global efforts have intertwined feminist principles into socio-cultural practices and into sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Feminist principles in socio-cultural practices and SRHR share similar goals, which include increasing gender parity and improving health and well-being. Historically, however, the two fields have operated independently and have missed opportunities to build upon their premised-value and socio-cultural linkages. Premised values are identified as the concept that combines agency, bodily autonomy, inclusion, and intersectionality. From a sociocultural perspective, intersections occur in relation to the experience of gender roles, harmful traditional practices, and education. This paper describes evidence linking feminism and SRHR and offers recommendations for integration that could strengthen the impact of both fields.



## Introduction

Historically, the gospel of feminism has been preached from different geographical points. The common goal, however, is to redress the inequality that puts women and girls at disadvantage. A similar objective comes with the sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda. Feminism and SRHR both aim to transform the present status quo, which creates barriers for women and their ability to be the decision-makers of their bodies and choices. Additionally, both fields centre on the need for non-discriminatory and non-judgmental access to reproductive and sexual services, and information. Thus far, however, the common purpose and potential synergies between these two fields have gone largely unexplored.

In most of the SRHR resources and publications, feminism is often not included. When it is included, it is often added as an afterthought. For example, the list of SRHR topics on the World Health Organization's (WHO) website does not include feminism (1). And with few exceptions, the programmes and research supported by the largest funders of global SRHR programmes do not address linkages with feminism. In the Covid-19 global recovery plan, the Guttmacher Institute reported that feminist foreign policy is a critical vehicle for the global community and should be used to promote gender equality, and to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights are prioritized (2).

In this paper, I argue that feminism must be integrated into the definition, practice, and evaluation of SRHR programming, and that work across the two fields should be blended. I describe the premise-values and sociocultural linkages between feminism and SRHR and

highlight key evidence and evidence gaps. I will also identify entry points for programmes to integrate services and offer recommendations for collaboration and synergy. While the work of improving SRHR and feminism is global, there is still a need for greater integration particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in Africa.

In addition, I appreciate efforts from the African feminist movement in embracing a progressive gendered approach that is inclusive of trans\* and/or gender queer individuals, who also need access to sexual and reproductive health services and information. I use gender-inclusive language, including womxn\* whenever possible. While I advocate for the inclusion of all gender identities in discussions of feminism and SRHR, I also use "women and girls" in this article when it is referred to in the literature. In addition, neither feminism nor SRHR can be adequately addressed without paying attention to the gender norms and dynamics experienced by individuals. These gender norms and dynamics exist in the cultures and communities in which they live, and thus we use gender-specific language when discussing those topics.

## Background on Feminism and SRHR

### *Feminism*

Across the globe, feminist movements have established a presence. A call for recognition of women's rights as human rights and the need to eradicate patriarchal gender roles is part of the feminist mandate. African feminism has also been strengthened with technology, Gen-Z energy, and intergenerational communication.



African feminists continually challenge ahistorical conceptions of the patriarchal state and emphasize the importance of the power struggles across class, race, and gender. These factors are important for transforming gender policies. With the understanding that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too, (3) the African feminist movement has decolonised women's rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, and what they mean for African women. While the primary audience is African women, being a feminist in the 21st century embodies the idea of intersectionality, which emphasises that oppression exists in many ways in a patriarchal system. Oppression can be experienced by men, people of colour and the LGBTQ+ community. Feminism about making sure that everyone, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, has equal opportunities in the workplace, at school and everywhere in between (4).

### **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**

The term "sexual and reproductive health and rights" (SRHR) was explored nearly 20 years ago at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (5). An outcome of the conference explained that SRHR is

**“a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and... not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health, therefore, implies that people are able to have a satisfying**

**and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which is not against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant (para 72).**

While SRHR focuses on the reproductive and sexual life of persons, feminism focuses on the principle of choice in all areas - including SRHR. Likewise, the idea of feminism that is rooted in white American women's history has been challenged and decolonised by African scholarship, and now also recognises African women's history and lived experiences.

This paper is not the first attempt at addressing the synergies between feminism and SRHR. Heidari et al. proposed a feminist approach to global health data. They emphasized that embracing intersectional feminist perspectives, and their inherently decolonising features, in national and global health data collection methodologies necessitates a transformation of the institutions that produce data and knowledge on SRHR. This holds true for the COVID-19 pandemic, where an intersectional lens was used to guide responses to the health crises. In this paper, I elucidate the premised values of feminism which corroborate with the



SRHR agenda and explore sociocultural factors.

### ***Premised-Values between Feminism and SRHR***

Fundamentally, feminism is about dismantling patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system of male authority, which legitimises the oppression of womxn through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious, and military institutions (7). This patriarchal system controls womxn's bodies, their sexuality and reproductive health.

### ***The Concept of Agency***

Agency can be understood as the degree to which womxn have influence over making their own choices (8). The tensions around choice emerge because choice is political. It is political because when womxn and girls choose, it is often from what patriarchy has offered and not what they inherently want. Additionally, the capacity of womxn to make choices is often restricted. These restrictions mainly stem from external factors such as poverty, culture and religious beliefs, insecurity, climate change, all of which accentuate patriarchy. For a womxn to exercise her agency, she must first be aware of her capacity to decide and then she must believe that she is able to carry out those decisions. For a womxn to claim reproductive and sexual rights over her body, she must first be aware of her capacity to, and should not be guided by societal expectations. Agency manifests the 'power within'. Whether resources are available or not, a womxn is conscious and self-aware enough to make decisions for herself using her 'power within'.

Research from 2013 argued that feminist agency is paradoxical as feminist assumptions about women's socialisation seem to detail that women's agency is compromised by sexist oppression (9). It argued that the traditional conceptions of agency are individualistic and valorise an illusory and unattractive ideal of agents and agency. However, in this paper, the conception of agency is liberation within and a manifestation of power outwards. Agency, therefore, includes liberation from sexist oppressions and societal chokeholds.

### ***Bodily Autonomy***

Bodily autonomy is about the right to make decisions over one's own life and future (10). One of the ways that the feminist movement has evolved is through the assertion that a womxn's body belongs to her alone. This concept explains why someone cannot touch you, have sex with you, or use your body or body parts in any way without your consent (11). Over the years there have been various adaptations of bodily autonomy in SRHR programmatic campaigns, particularly stemming from funders and civil society organisations (12). My Body is My Own, a 2021 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), reveals the global state of SRHR. The report disclosed that nearly half of womxn in 57 developing countries are denied the right to decide whether to have sex with their partners, use contraception or seek health care (13). This illuminates the patriarchal thread that ties womxn together, and that continues to deny them their sexual and reproductive rights. To challenge this is to politicise the struggle for womxn's rights. It also questions the legitimacy of the structures that keep womxn subjugated and develops tools for transformative analysis



and action (14).

### ***The Concept of Inclusion and Intersectionality***

Intersectionality and the promotion of inclusivity are pivotal features of this fourth wave feminism. The term intersectionality (15) was coined by civil rights activist and professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, (16) and can be defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”.

Most developing countries have an essential package health service, but most are not specific and inclusive enough to allow for comprehensive SRHR services. These comprehensive SRHR services are meant to be offered by the government, or governments should at least aspire to provide them. A 2021 report reveals that countries’ inclusion of SRHR interventions echo larger trends in prioritisation (17). However, despite countries’ commitments to Universal Health Coverage, and to SRHR as a human right, a comprehensive set of essential SRHR interventions and services are not included in the vast majority of low- and lower-middle income countries. Majority of the SRHR interventions ignore intersectionality and neglect to recognize the discriminations experienced by lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans womxn, womxn with disabilities and womxn in displaced communities, when accessing SRHR information and services. An SRHR agenda that chooses or excludes group of people is oppressive in and of itself.

## ***Sociocultural linkages between feminism and SRHR***

### ***Gender Roles***

Gender roles are a major area where feminism and SRHR intersect. Patriarchy has socially and culturally constructed gender roles for men and women. When a baby is born, everyone is excited to know whether it is a boy or a girl. From this moment on, it can feel like our lives are mapped out in front of us, with society telling us that boys like certain things, and girls like other things (18). As puberty sets in, girls and boys often are obligated to follow different norms about ‘acceptable’ engagement in intimate and sexual relationships (19). Girls are expected to maintain sexual purity and modesty, while boys are encouraged to live out their sexual fantasies and imaginations. Girls grow up questioning their sexual desires, with little access to sexuality education. In 2020, The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that approximately 12 million girls aged 15–19 years and at least 777,000 girls under 15 years give birth every year in developing regions (20). The feminist agenda, in this case, should aim to dismantle gender roles because these roles stem from a patriarchal system. While major strides have been noted, we must acknowledge that there is still a long way to go. Both feminism and SRHR interventions have been utilised to ensure access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and safe youth-friendly centres for reproductive services.

### ***Harmful Traditional Practises***

Traditions are established doctrines, conducts, patterns, and belief systems that are transferred



from one generation to another generation by community members. They are based on cherished societal values which are upheld, guided, protected, and enforced by strong prohibitions that manifest in bans, fines, taboos and superstitions (21). Harmful traditional practices are discriminatory practices that have harmful effects on the people's lives and wellness, and obstruct soundness, goal attainment, livelihood, the enjoyment of rights, and economic development (22). Harmful practices in developing countries are, but not limited to, tribal marks, female genital mutilation, virginity tests, widowhood rites, breast pressing, child labour, and child marriage. Harmful traditional practices are prevalent and are known to violate people's fundamental human rights, especially the rights of women and girls. Many SRHR interventions highlight the need to end these harmful practices as they do not align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, which promotes good health and well-being. Additionally, these practices restrict the agency and bodily autonomy of women and girls.

### **Education**

In many developing countries, SRHR is recognised as an essential component of poverty reduction. SRHR also reduces high fertility and mortality rates, the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and addresses sexual violence (23). The education system in developing countries is burdened with various SRHR concerns such as unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, unsafe abortion, early marriage, and HIV/AIDS and other STIs. These SRHR concerns tend to negatively influence students' academic achievement, attendance rate, the quality of their educational experiences, and in some cases lead to early drop-out. Adolescents, particularly girls, are affected the most. Unfortunately, not much effort to integrate SRHR-curriculum into

the educational sector has been shown by governments. Education is a human right and ensuring that girls and boys complete formal education is at the core of SRHR and feminism.

### **Recommendations for Feminism and SRHR integration**

When looking at evidence-based intersections between feminism and SRHR, it is important to seek the integration of both fields. When feminism is ignored or watered down, especially in a field that addresses the autonomy and agency of women's bodies, gender equality cannot be achieved. Opportunities to improve health and well-being, to end unsafe abortion, and to end maternal mortality can be missed. Effective integration of both feminism and SRHR will increase women's capacity to have agency over their bodies, it will improve access to non-discriminatory and non-judgmental sexual and reproductive health and services, and it will reduce sexual violence and harmful traditional and religious practices.

For effective synergy in both fields, Governments, regional institutions, and development/technical organisations need to:

- » Clearly express and include feminism in the description and understanding of SRHR interventions and programs, including budgeting. Terms related to gender must be expressed using an inclusive and comprehensive approach to end stigma and discrimination around SRHR interventions.
- » Provide support and commitment, in the form of funding and resources, to gather data for analysis on alternatives that can be used when delivering SRHR interventions with a feminist lens.



- » Seek collaboration and partnerships with relevant stakeholders to campaign and advocate for ending harmful traditional practices and culture.
- » Expand scope of sexual and reproductive health and rights intervention to include safe abortion and cost-effective essential sexual and reproductive packages. In terms of who receives these services, SRHR services should be for womxn in all their diversities.

## Conclusion

Feminism is a part of the trajectory to achieving comprehensive and inclusive sexual and reproductive health and rights. The premised values that link feminism and SRHR reveal that there are numerous opportunities that can be harnessed. Seeking synergies between SRHR and feminism gives room for advancement and provides dignity and human rights for individuals. Therefore, we must continuously embrace feminism in SRHR programming and advocacy interventions.

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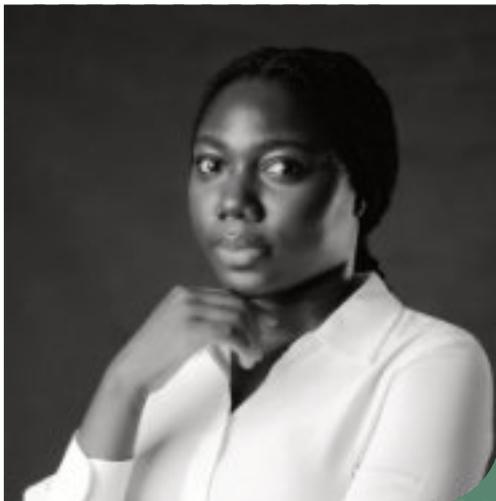
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# Christianity and the Patriarchy are Bedfellows

by Mubeezi Tenda

Here I am a godless woman. When often asked how I lost my religion, I say that in attempting to topple the patriarchy, the godhead started falling.

My journey to godless womanhood begins where the journeys of others like myself begin. It begins in a post colony south of the globe, where we are all at the mercy of something. The children are at the mercy of women, who are at the mercy of the men, who are at the mercy of their social class, which is at the mercy of their governments that are at the mercy of other governments.

This is a precarious position to be in, it is no wonder that we all simply stick our heads in our respective shrines and have them hard baked into religious belief. This accounts for the 99 percent of Ugandans who subscribe to religious belief, with only a negligible amount of people risking eternal damnation.

In Uganda, you can't swing your arms without perforating the wall of a Kiwempe church (makeshift church made with papyrus mats) that sprouted overnight on the footpath.

These Biwempe churches are bursting at the seams with the people who are stuck in the treads of society's shoes; the poor and women, of which women are the poorest.

Each church is like the women's summit. Women are singing, dancing, praying, crying,

trying to get their maker to see them, to hear them, to answer them. They are there on Sundays, they are there on weekdays for their lunch hour where they forgo a meal to have a sermon and a session of "deliverance" from their social ailments. They return in the evenings draped in several layers of lesus (multipurpose wrapper) to steel themselves against the cold as they pray through the deep night, perhaps in the biting cold among the shrubs on Prayer Mountain (a hill) in Sseguku or at Pastor Tom's the benevolent patriarch of Mutundwe.

A pastor ministering over a university fellowship I was attending once advised us, "As a woman, you must hide yourself in God completely such that any man pursuing you must go through God to find you."

Women in this society are so deeply entrenched in religion, that at their weddings or funerals, their virtues and talents are summarised into one phrase- "*She was a god-fearing woman.*"

Their piety manifests through a strong adherence to ritual; the feverish fingering of beads and mumbling hail mary's on the morning commute; rising in the small hours of the morning at 3am to cast demons into blazing lakes; the creation and attachment to talismans, bibles under the pillow, a bottle of olive oil, holy water from the martyr's shrine.



Meanwhile women's counterparts, the men, are not so religious. They make up only a fraction of Sunday services, a flicker in the overnight services. They show up during Christmas for tradition's sake, and maybe during elections to solicit votes from their local church that is brimming with women, before vanishing once more into the worlds of men.

In a strange turn of events, even though men are less religious, they seem to enjoy most of the benefits that the devout, women in this case, are always praying and hoping to receive. These would be prosperity, protection/safety, and a dignified existence.

Going by the statistics at least men are wealthier, enjoy more safety compared to women and they seem to have most of their shortcomings in society received with the benevolence that religion claims to be abundant with.

Meanwhile, in many societies, women despite their immersion into this supposedly superior powerful force, continue to live as the most vulnerable. In almost every society, they live poor and unsavoury existences on the margins. How does this come about? One wonders before one looks closely and discovers that women's continuous subjugation is a key ingredient for the sustenance of patriarchal religions such as the Abrahamic faith.

It is interesting that a few pages into the holy book, the woman is the first to commit an offence. It is even more interesting that her first and ultimate crime that makes hell break loose is not murder, it's not theft, but rather it is for exercising autonomy in the search for knowledge.

In looking at these deeply treasured spiritual mythologies that have persisted through

hundreds of years and continue to spread among the nations, it is no wonder that we see that the burden of women has been unrelenting suffering. There is not only a reluctance to change this, but resistance and reinforcement of it as holy will.

Throughout the bible, men go on to commit several crimes that even we in the present-day agree to be atrocities. Even men claimed to be after God's own heart, like David, rape, murder, pillage but they are not flung out of paradise. Their stories continue to be told as human stories and their legacies of being great and intelligent men are celebrated, even in the eyes of God. Women on the other hand, starting from Eve, are severely punished for what one would consider being crimes of a small magnitude compared to their counterparts. Women in the bible either lead immaculate lives with no fault or they are known throughout history for their one flaw. We see David forgiven for killing and raping, but Lot's wife is turned into salt for looking back. Also, after all her good work for God, Rahab is known for her work that is considered derogatory- Rahab the harlot.

In comparing the lives of women in holy books alongside those of men, we see how the present-day injustices against women are justified.

**“I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”**

We also see how injustices are perpetuated as they go unquestioned or insufficiently addressed wherever religion thrives.

We see this reflected in how many years it has taken for women and girls to be recognised as autonomous. Many religions, especially



Abrahamic religions, have sustained the belief that since the Garden of Eden, nothing good comes out of giving women the right to make their own decisions. This has resulted in the transference and maintenance of decision-making power into the hands of men, and the encouragement of women to remain submissive.

Furthermore, the biblical statement on the woman's "punishment" being childbirth provides ammunition that aids in limiting women to childcare, which in the modern economy remains mostly uncompensated. On the other hand, the biblical punishment for men has gone on to work in their favour, freeing them of the domestic care work and in the modern economy placing them in work that offers financial returns.

This kind of dynamic set by Christianity, places women's decision-making power in the hands of men, and justifies why men possess the divine right to attain financial resources, like land and capital. This has become a system that has women in the treads of society's boot, as the poor and oppressed.

It is this state of affairs that drives women in droves to altars and to the feet of religious leaders.

Praying for cleansing from whatever sins are responsible for their state of being. Praying for a share in these lands and riches promised to Abraham. Praying for men who can lift them out of their distress. Praying their way into jobs, marriages, for justice and the afterlife.

It's not by chance that they are only left with prayer as the most viable solution. Even without being able to articulate it, women feel trapped in deep systemic oppression that only divine

intervention, which has willed it in the start, can resolve.

The way out seems to lie in two solutions: women can either grovel at the feet of this god to negotiate for resources and their rights. This would mean going the divine way, attempting to redeem or cleanse themselves with the aid of the people who were given authority over them, men.

The divine way is by being a good woman in the eyes of men and therefore the eyes of this god.

By making this choice, women are rewarded with the promise of marriage and gaining the protection from these men, in whom they inspire benevolence.

The second way is the most dreadful, but clearly the most rewarding.

Women just like their foremother Eve can decide to be fallen women. Disobeying divinely willed rulers and in doing so, disobeying this god as they reach out to pluck the forbidden fruits of their time. These fruits could be education, resources, justice, equality, you name it.

The patriarchy which has relegated women to second class citizens for ages has been able to survive by entrenching itself into vital organs of society like the economy, culture, political structure as well as the religion of the day.

While culture, politics and economies are gutted liberally by those who seek to expose and extract the roots of oppressive systems that have burrowed within, religion especially in post colonial countries still enjoys immunity.

Of course it is not by chance that we shudder



at the thought of peering into the mouth of a god whom we have been threatened or cajoled to revere. By design, religion is meant to be sustained by the simple state of belief, and coupled with the promise of eternal relief in paradise or the threat of an eternity spent frying in hell, religion quickly earns immunity from investigation.

It is this absolute nature of religion that makes it an eternal bastion of abuse and oppression making it also the perfect candidate for a laundry list of systems that we must confront and interrogate honestly.

As we observe, name and resist against the imperial, capitalist, sexist systems of our day, we must not be afraid to look these systems squarely in the eye when they stare back at us from their safe and sacred haven.

The violent imperialist-colonialist legacy of religion lies unhidden in our history books, in burning villages where literally and metaphorically the message is, convert or

burn. Its exploitative capitalist heart pumps with vitality within our society, sustained by the last coins of those who are marginalised. Its misogynistic nature asserts itself from age to age, in sexist laws that rob women of their humanity and liberty.

Just like Eve, the first woman to defy, according to the creation story of Abrahamic religions, women who question religion risk being flung out of paradise. Confronting age-old systems like these, could mean ostracism from societies that use religion to ensure women toe the patriarchal line. This defiance could cost women familial support, community support, work, romantic prospects and in some places their lives.

Remembering that for historically marginalised people, every liberty enjoyed has been won at a cost, we can still look to Eve for inspiration. She was cast out of paradise, yes, but she did get what she deeply desired which was knowledge and self determination.



# Making Sense of Women's Empowerment

by Mireille Kayeye

## Introduction

This research project aims to investigate the meaning of women's empowerment and to generate new knowledge on the opportunities and barriers to empowerment for African women. I examine the literature on the concept of empowerment, how it is understood and implemented in various communities. Other aspects of interest will cover how women exercise agency, the resources they have, and achievements they obtain in relation to the choices they can make in their lives. Reflecting on my own experience, I first arrived in Australia for education in 2013. I had been awarded a scholarship to undertake a Master's degree at one of Australia's best universities, the Australian National University (ANU). In hindsight, I thought access to education was the road to empowerment.

Is it though? Perhaps I thought that studying would open doors to opportunities that I could not even dream about. The simple fact that I had moved from a developing Francophone country to study in a developed English-speaking country seemed so empowering. Also, for the first time in my life I was going to live on my own, make my own decisions and

make my own choices without relying on my family. What is empowerment then if not a mix of having agency, access to health, increased self-confidence, and financial independence?

Life's circumstances brought me back to Melbourne for the second time in 2015. This time, I returned seeking safety far away from my home country in the East African community. My understanding and sense of empowerment collapsed completely. My lived experience as an African woman of colour seeking asylum, for four years and half in Australia, exposed me to unique challenges due to the intersection of my race, gender and migration status. This has motivated me to investigate other women's experiences in relation to empowerment.

The significant increase of women in forced migration informs us of the unique challenges they face, which in essence requires further investigation and understanding. In this paper, I first examine definitions of women's empowerment, and then secondly, I move on to analyse the links between power and empowerment. The third part of this paper provides a critique and key tensions that arise from this concept and then lastly, I review frameworks and approaches to assess women's empowerment.



## Empowerment

Empowerment is a broad concept linked to building social change for communities that have faced historical disadvantage. The use of empowerment can be traced back to the 1960's "Civil Rights Movement" in the United States of America. Feminists from the Global South then used the term before it was picked up by Euro-American feminists (Sardenberg 2016, p.19). The concept has been explored in various disciplines such as education (Carr, 2003), communication (Rogers & Singhal, 2003), social work (Turner & Maschi, 2015) and psychology (Rappaport, 1984). However, I draw on the development sector's use of empowerment for the purpose of this study. In the 1980s and 1990s, the term 'empowerment' came to be understood "as an unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power", particularly in the lives of women (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343). The essence of empowerment lies in the shift of power relations, the recognition of inequalities in one's world and the choice to take a stand, have control and be involved in building structural change (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1995). In recent years, feminists and gender activists have become very critical of this concept because it cannot be defined or measured and has often been turned into a buzzword that has lost the political agenda of addressing structural gender inequalities experienced by women globally. (S. Batliwala, 2007).

## Definition of Empowerment

The notion of women's empowerment is complex, but there have been attempts to define it. Kabeer (1999) conceptualises empowerment in terms of choice in relation to

"agency, resources and achievements" (p. 437). She offers a simple definition of empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" and "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Kabeer (1999) emphasises that the ability to choose is vital because it impacts the kind of choice a woman makes. On the other hand, for Rowlands (1995), empowerment has a focus on participation and "must be about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it" and is about "individuals being able to maximise the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and state" (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102). Rowlands (1995) makes it clear that there must be an option for a person to get involved, consulted, and engaged regardless of the difficulties they face. Both Rowlands and Kabeer suggest that to undergo a process of empowerment, a person must have experienced disadvantages, in other words, disempowerment.

Many scholars agree that empowerment entails a process of consciousness-raising that begins with the individual but requires collective action in the longer term to address structural inequalities. Eyben et al., (2006, p. 5) call this process "reflexive consciousness" which is the wakeup call that starts from an individual person, who then questions what power is or questions the possibility of things being different. They do this because it is "a consciousness that offers the possibility of transforming social relationships through one's own changed behaviour".

Cornwall (2016) highlights how the processes of empowerment "engage people in making sense of their worlds, their relationships, their



assumptions and beliefs, practises and values with potentially transformational effects” (p. 344). In this case, the personal becomes political and it shows how change starts from an individual and can move towards collective effort. The importance of this concept is at the core of every woman’s life experience, how she sees her world, understands the inequalities she is subjected to, and then makes the decision to come together with others to change humanity. Collective action is the most effective way for particularly stigmatised, marginalised and socially excluded constituencies of women such as sex workers or disabled women who, without organising, “would not have been able to challenge popular opinion, public policy, or even the perception of women’s movements about these groups” (Batliwala, 2012, p. 7). For greater successes and changes that can transform women’s lives, it is critical for women to come together in their diversities. Their individual lived experiences can guide collective action that cannot be ignored.

People’s ability to make choices and the nature of the choices they make is structured by context-specific power relations. The ability to make critical choices is fundamental to women’s empowerment and is dependent on several factors. Choices are structured by gender, legal status frameworks, social norms, economic status, access to resources, social networks, and other aspects such as identity, race, religion, sexuality. These all have an impact on outcomes obtained. Therefore, context matters in developing a clear understanding of women’s empowerment.

## Tensions in Understandings of Women’s Empowerment

This section explores current tensions in common understandings of women’s empowerment. In this exploration, I divide this section into five parts to explore whether empowerment is a process, a goal, or the link to structural change. I then identify how women’s empowerment has been used as a neoliberal tool, the role played by men to achieve it and its measurement through various approaches.

Is empowerment a process or a goal? Across the literature, development empowerment is understood as “a process, not a fixed state nor an end-point” (Cornwall, 2016, p. 344). This process is “dynamic and changing and varies widely according to circumstances” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 129). It can be “temporary” and its outcome might even lead into a state of ‘disempowerment’ if no ‘targets’ are attached to the process (Cornwall, 2016, p. 355). Cornwall (2016) uses the metaphor of a journey to highlight that the process can take time because empowerment is subjective and is experienced differently. Empowerment requires hard work and can be done solo or with others. One thing that most feminists agree with, according to Carr (2003, p.13), is that the starting point of empowerment begins with a state of “powerlessness, oppression or deprivation”. She sees empowerment as “cyclical, rather than linear” because the process needs to accommodate changing environments (Carr, 2003, p. 8). This has led to empowerment being discussed through means, dimensions, models, methods, approaches, or strategies which can create confusion. A strategy should involve “a series of organised actions that either challenge or use the legal system to empower



economically, politically, and socially” and offers multiple benefits to women’s empowerment (Schuler, 1986, p. 21).

For other feminists, empowerment is an end-result which is achieved through change. Empowerment is a “goal” with a clear objective that involves the “eradication of the immense social inequalities among women” (Sardenberg, 2016, p. 25). Therefore, any of its achievements could be a goal achieved. In the short term, this can include deciding whether to have children or not and, in the long term this can involve working to change reproductive health policy (Kabeer, 1999, p. 348). Others understand empowerment as both a process and a goal (Rappaport, 1984). For communities who have experienced oppression and injustice, empowerment can involve a small step like questioning what feels wrong. It can involve questioning what might have previously been considered as normal. Reaching these realisations can be powerful and can lead to new levels of empowerment.

One of the criticisms of empowerment is that it reflects a neo-colonial perspective determined by the West, which sees disadvantaged people as a resource to meet development agendas. Sardenberg (2016) argues that women in Latin America and Brazil have developed a mistrust in relation to the use of the term empowerment because it has “legitimised practices that have nothing to do with advancing women’s ability to implement structural change” (p. 18). She argues that for example, approaches implemented by multinational organisations such as the World Bank might focus on implementing programs for developing countries which may appear to take an empowering approach, but do not tackle the factors that lead to exclusion and

“disempowerment” (Sardenberg, 2016, p. 19). Critical questions that are not always addressed in women’s empowerment involve “which women and girls? With what kind of empowerment and who is doing the empowering?” (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010, p. 146). Consequently, this term is seen as divisive.

McFadden (2010) argues that the concept of empowerment divides women into two groups: wealthy and poor. For example, the derogatory lens through which women from the South are viewed showcases that the “daily struggles and success stories” in women’s empowerment are never used to describe women in the North. This sends the message that women from the South are disempowered and require external intervention and women from the North, who are saviours with solutions can fix everything (McFadden, 2010, p.162). Drawing from this perspective, McFadden (2010) wonders whether women’s empowerment has ever been about the universal collective struggles of women or whether it is another form of ‘power over’ expressed from one group of women to another? It appears that this form of empowerment continues to reinforce colonial power hierarchies between those who save and those who need saving. McFadden (2010) contends that empowerment is a neoliberal concept that was never meant to address collective problems that have faced socially excluded groups; instead, it works to reinforce “systems of privilege and power” (McFadden, 2010, p. 163). Feminists contend that what had started at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 as united action for structural transformation has failed to respond to collective social action for the women in the Global South. Sardenberg (2016) notes that the Conference on Women laid the



foundation on women's empowerment and gender equality as an urgent agenda for many countries with more than 15,000 delegates coming to discuss women's empowerment as a concept for the first time at the UN, however it did not achieve what it said it would.

One of the neoliberal critiques of empowerment is that it takes women as a homogeneous group, excluding the historical, political, and socio-economical situations of people and countries. Cornwall & Rivas (2015, p.393) argue that women's empowerment in development agendas focuses on the part women and girls can do by "making women work for development, rather than making development work for their equality and empowerment". Empowerment agendas discussed at an international level do not take into consideration global inequities and differ from what grassroots and local women are experiencing on the ground. Sardenberg (2016, p.21) calls this "liberal empowerment". Liberal empowerment is a strategy by multinational institutions, such as the World Bank, to ignore local realities like patriarchy that creates inequality among women. These multinational companies end up creating projects that create "empowerment without power" (Sardenberg, 2016, p.25). The focus on women doing all the work and fixing a problem they haven't created themselves misses the point. For example, efforts that are put in by these companies to help or empower the individual woman by giving loans to them do not address the pressing structural gendered problems. Sometimes, it feels like a lost cause when women try to "be empowered within disempowering structures and systems" (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010, p. 147). This has generated a lot of "frustration and anger" especially for women who have worked hard to bring attention to gendered inequalities,

believing it would serve women globally (p. 144).

Additionally, women situated in formerly colonised countries that have undergone historical processes of "capitalist extraction, leaving them economically deprived" feel that this notion of empowerment does not work for them (McFadden, 2010, p. 161). Particularly women of colour who are "economically excluded and politically marginalised", and in terms of "social/geopolitical location" (McFadden, 2010, p.161). From a local perspective, McFadden (2010) adds that the concept "flattens class", because even in the same community elite women or scholars are motivated by different outcomes compared to illiterate women who are just struggling for survival. In other words, a woman's privilege heavily impacts on women's empowerment.

A serious weakness of women's empowerment is that it has become gendered. This is problematic as it "excludes men from the feminist discourse, organisations and movement" by isolating men and excluding them from women's activities (Sharma, 2000, p. 25). Instead, it should include men especially because "domination and oppressions are the result of patriarchy". Empowerment should be a focus of all genders and needs to also target men and allow them to be involved in building change (Rahman, 2013, p.12). It takes effort from men and women, and more than a word or a concept to build a just world for women. As pointed out by Rowland (1997, p. 132) women's empowerment requires the "behaviour of men to change", which often occurs through negotiation between men and women.

One major concern about women's empowerment involves the difficulty of



measurement. Perhaps the failure to define the concept “weakens the value of the concept as a tool for analysis or as part of a strategy for change” (Rowlands, 1997, p.8). The problem starts with deciding what to measure that can properly provide evidence of the change occurring in women’s lives. Batwilawa (2010) argues that indicators alone are incapable of offering an understanding of the realities of women’s lives on the ground. Projects tend to measure performance against preset activities, which might tick boxes, but does not necessarily inform society on how change has taken place. Often “measurement is used more as a tool of enforcement and accountability to the donor than as a means of understanding and learning what works and changing strategy if necessary” (Batliwala, 2010, p. 10). An important criticism is whether frameworks to measure women’s empowerment can provide the full picture because power structures may appear to shift, but sustainable change or deeper transformations do not happen. Most of the tools focus on the measurement of “individual organisations and often, single projects or interventions”. Therefore, it is difficult to find a tool aimed at capturing “the results of larger-scale women’s empowerment processes that build collective power and deeper change, including accounts of success” (Batliwala, 2010, p. 10). Moreover, most tools do not allow for “tracking negative change, reversals, backlash, unexpected change, and other processes that push back or shift the direction of a positive change trajectory” (Batliwala, 2010, p.12). For example, local grassroots organisations involved in gender equality work find it difficult to prove the impact of their work; they are asked to measure the number of programs held or the number of women who have participated in

workshops rather than the results of the process of change.

Although this is the case, academics and practitioners have tried to find ways to analyse what works in advancing women’s rights and empowerment. What has been helpful is the development of indicators that are based on an analysis of the dimensions of women’s empowerment. Kabeer (1999) offers a framework with three dimensions that include resources, agency, and achievements. Resources would involve looking at access to resources such as land, looking at the control a woman might have in expenditure or in terms of self-reliance without depending on male relatives. Agency is measured by looking at decision-making capability, which is the role a woman plays in making specific decisions regarding the use of family planning, number of children, children’s education, purchases of goods, work outside of the home and ability to obtain resources. Achievement can be looked at in terms of indicators such as survival rates or infant immunisation, reports of abuse, beliefs in girls’ education, report of sharing of roles and decision-making, equality in marriage or outcomes of change in women’s lives in general. According to Kabeer (2009), it is important to carefully select indicators that quantify women’s empowerment keeping in mind that “the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment” (Kabeer, 1999, p.452). Additionally, through her analysis of multiple projects she found that although indicators of empowerment might be inaccurate, they are helpful because they “indicate the direction and meaning of change” (p. 462).



Methodologies have been developed by organisations with an intention to monitor and evaluate women's empowerment. Cornwall (2016, p. 343) reviewed the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme that explored women's empowerment in sixty countries through the analysis of interventions related to power and agency and found that empowerment is more complex than "reducing dimensions of women's experience to a set of measurable indicators". She highlights that, empowering experiences in one area of a woman's life do not automatically translate into a greater capacity to exercise agency and transform power relations in another part of her life (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343). For example, giving loans to women can generate revenue but real transformation can only happen by "creating enabling institutions, laws and policies" (Cornwall, 2016, p. 345). In this situation, women receive money they can use to start a small business with the intention to generate revenue. However, they will not be able to access education, learn how to influence policies and change discriminatory practices and norms in place that prevent them from being equal members of society. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) makes the same point that the UNDP Gender Empowerment Index might focus on measuring how many women are involved in politics by quota, but it does not consider agency in other aspects of their lives. More recently, organisations like Oxfam (2017) have developed frameworks that help practitioners create empowerment indicators with a co-design model that collaborates with participants using all forms of power. This includes 'power with', 'power within', and 'power to', and focuses on personal, relational, and environmental levels. This study will use

Kabeer's framework of understanding women's empowerment in relation to agency, resources, achievements, and the choices women make.

Overall feminists and gender activists have become uncomfortable with the misuse of the concept of women's empowerment in the gender and development sector. Cornwall & Anyidoho (2010) argue that although there is more funding and support for women's programs, it does not necessarily result in "mobilising women to tackle structural inequalities" (p. 145). It seems that women have managed to bring key issues that were overlooked to the table. These issues include land rights, gender-based violence and political representation. However, activists cannot ignore the fact that international agreements, such as the Millennium Development Goals or the new Sustainable Development Goals take place in the UN, are developed "far from those who are most affected by their implementation" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 398). If women's empowerment appears to be insufficient then we might need to create a new term, one that works for everyone and is aimed at transforming women's individual and social realities (McFadden, 2010). Alternatively, one can reinforce other important frameworks such as human rights in order to achieve gender justice (Sardenberg, 2016). For this to happen we might need to start one step at a time, measuring and monitoring each project where there is slow progress until every woman can claim that concept regardless of their race, geographical location, language, class, gender, or religion (Cornwall, 2016).

Gaining an understanding and finding ways to identify and evaluate empowerment is critical. Therefore, efforts to understand women's



empowerment should respond to the needs of women in various contexts.

## Empowerment Approaches

### *What works – Conclusion?*

Empowerment approaches that work well are focused on engaging generative forms of power and centre the lives of women throughout the process of empowerment. Rowlands (1997) argues that projects that reduce the obstacles women face in their own empowerment process are the most beneficial because “power in other forms becomes more possible” (Rowlands, 1997, p.132). In this instance, the focus is on power to, power with and power within and less on power over.

Individuals can gain an increased sense of self-worth and agency in decision making, which is ‘power within’. What matters the most is making sure that empowerment “contributes to an increase in self-esteem, self-confidence, and so on” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 134). Once this happens, Cornwall emphasises that other forms of power will usually follow because “it is when women recognize their ‘power within’ and act together with other women to exercise ‘power with’ and gain power to act as agents” (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356). Utilising ‘power with’ will then create power to encourage collaboration, partnerships, and negotiation at a family, community, local and national level. When people are feeling more confident, they are more likely to speak up about their needs, be involved in advocacy, leadership, or even engage in entrepreneurship and community initiatives. Women “develop a political and collective awareness by analysing and reflecting on their own lives and working on problems with others (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p.55). The ripple effects will be translated

within the family, the community, and at the national or international levels.

Efficient empowerment approaches build on the strengths of community members, rather than their needs. Older practises prioritised stakeholders implementing programs in a one-way intervention approach without letting community members actively participate as implementers. The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is one illustration of approaches that engage community members on implementing projects for themselves, where they are seen as “capable and active citizens rather than dependent clients of service delivery” (Mathie et al., 2017). VeneKlasen & Miller (2002) add that one key element in empowerment is the participation of individuals. For example, a project “where women are supported to develop a set of empowerment indicators to assess their own personal change” is empowering and meaningful (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 57). Consulting women and including them in activities where they use their skills and engage is an effective empowerment practice.

As NGOs and service providers play a vital role in implementing empowerment strategies, they are urged to challenge their own position of power before engaging in work that strives towards empowerment. Rowlands (1997) stresses that professionals should avoid working in “ways that disempower” or tell other people “What they should do and think” (Rowlands, 1997, p.104). Understanding that empowerment practice can be done with and not to individuals is critical. For instance, making sure staff members or volunteers can “accompany rather than direct or instruct” offers room for empowerment to occur. This is more effective than holding someone’s hand and



deciding for them (Cornwall, 2016, p. 350). A positive result of this type of engagement is that it discourages “dependency” and encourages the process of empowerment to happen.

Moreover, representation can also be a pathway to empowerment. When service providers make room and offer a space for individuals to represent themselves in their diversity, it can also be very empowering. Cornwall (2016) points out how “changing these representations is a form of social action that can have a powerful impact on women’s sense of their own power” (p. 354). Involvement in recruitment, project implementation, consultations in meetings or participation in discussions allows excluded people to be represented, which can be a form of empowerment. As Cornwall (2016) reminds us, external actors can make contributions by clearing obstacles from the journey of empowerment. If actors remember that empowerment is something that cannot be given, offered, handed to or “be done to or for anyone else”, they can still contribute to the process of women’s empowerment (Cornwall, 2016, p. 344).

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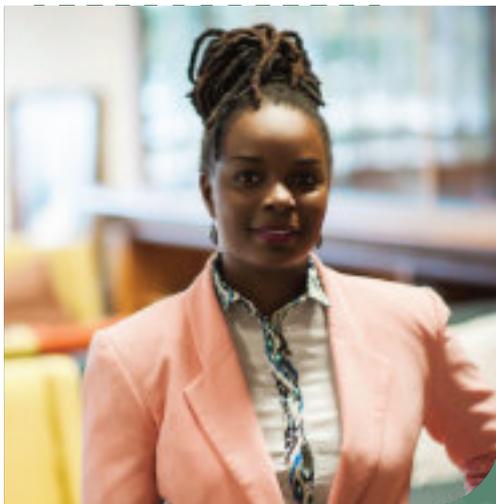
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# Reimagining Feminist Leadership Development for Social Transformation

by Eunice Musiime

## 1. Introduction

In 1997, Akina Mama wa Afrika, a feminist Pan-African organization, in a radical political act established the first-ever feminist leadership development programme on the African continent. This feminist leadership development programme emerged under the auspices of the African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI). The AWLI was curated as a space for young and mid-career women for the development of their feminist political consciousness on the root causes of gender inequality, discrimination, and oppression of women - in all their diversities. While addressing gender inequality was the primary aspiration, feminist activists were cognisant of the intersecting systems of oppression, and the siblings of patriarchy that include capitalism, imperialism, neo-colonialism among others. The aspiration of this programme was that

'awakening through conscious-raising' would propel the alumni to exercise agency, occupy leadership positions, and infuse feminist analysis into reform agendas. Each of these steps would enable the alumni to tackle the structural inequalities, intersecting systems of oppression, and secure progressive social change in Africa.

Twenty-five years later, not much of the journey has been documented nor have the experiences and progress of the alumni been well documented and or publicized. While several Herstories have been written and disseminated, they have hardly been applied to inform and shape new ways of feminist leadership development. Instead, derogatory statements and unchecked criticism of feminist leaders is still rife. Numerous times, feminist leadership development spaces have framed LGBTIQ people or activists as angry, immoral, or bad women <sup>82</sup>.

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82. Awusabo-Asare, K., Stillman, M., Keogh, S., Doku, D. T., Kumi-Kyereme, A., Esia-Donkoh, K., . . . Bankole, A. (2017). From paper to practice: Sexuality education policies and their implementation in Ghana. New York: Guttmacher Institute.



Further, the feminist movement in Uganda, as elsewhere, is often derided as being dead or on life support. The state of play of the feminist movement in Uganda is debated among a cross-section of stakeholders including development partners, civil society actors, and some members of the women's movement. Undeniably, there are many areas of improvement, and more so with the COVID -19 pandemic. The gains that were previously achieved by the feminist movement have been eroded, such that it seems that taking ten steps forward comes the unfortunate result of taking thirty backwards.

Nonetheless, part of the reasons why the contribution of the feminist leadership development in advancement of gender justice remains understated is limited research, and a view from the international development community especially actors in the global north that African feminist leadership development research is not methodologically rigorous.

This research piece therefore seeks to initiate conversation on feminist leadership development as one of the strategies to advance gender and social justice. It aims to draw from the lessons learnt to inform feminist praxis. It draws from the experience of Akina Mama wa Afrika's feminist leadership development journey, especially in the period between 2016-2020. Specifically, this piece of research will be linked to Akina Mama wa Afrika's political goal of developing a decolonial feminist leadership development programme.

## 2. Literature Review

Sylvia Tamale<sup>83</sup> points out that while engendering knowledge discourse and knowledge production is progressive, feminists must be careful not to fall into the trap of projecting African women as hapless victims of totalising patriarchal-capitalist oppression. Dr. Tamale argues that women, like all oppressed groups, have agency and always engage in some form of resistance, many times with a lot of creativity. This speaks to the need to ensure that herstories are documented to avoid the external eye that may project another story.

Amina Mama<sup>84</sup> notes that research on women's movements and activist strategies carried out to document experience has great strategic value to the movements concerned. These strategies may offer much to other movements too, whether they are in similar contexts or not. Mama points out that research by activists is research that in and of itself generates, inspires, and stimulates action. Equally important, independent, and locally generated research will most often be aligned to the goal of feminist research that aims to be liberatory and transformative. Thus, for example, Sylvia Tamale's (2020) seminal book titled 'Decolonialism and Afro-Feminism' is considered a significant resource for feminist activists. Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu's 'Building an Organization with a Soul', was equally well-received as an inspirational resource for feminist organizations. But these resources that have been mentioned, among many others, are a drop in the ocean of research.

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83. Sylvia Tamale (2020) *Decolonisation and Afro-feminism* Daraja Press Ottawa

84. Amina Mama (2011) What does it mean to do feminist research in African Context Feminist Review Conference proceedings 2011 available on <https://nigs.ufsc.br/files/2017/07/fr201122a-AMINA-MAMA-Feminist-Research-in-Africa.p>



Prominent feminist researcher and activist Srilatha Batliwala noted that

**“When you work for women’s interests, it’s two steps forward – and at least one step back. And those steps back are... often evidence of your effectiveness; they represent the threat you have posed to the power structure, and its attempt to push you back.”<sup>85</sup>**

Often, the steps back are perceived as the limited impact that work for women has, particularly when evaluating short term interventions. Srilatha’s view is further complemented by Dighe and Sarode,<sup>86</sup> who argue that the evaluation discourse in the Global South is largely dominated by discussions and actions around narrower dimensions, such as monitoring and auditing, and is often driven by donor /funder requirements. The emphasis is often on assessing “impact”, which leaves program implementers with little information on how to improve program performance or how to understand the underlying mechanisms that explain why their programs work (or not).

Wakefield and Koerppen (2017)<sup>87</sup> argue that capturing changes in gender and power can be challenging methodologically and politically. While we would like to establish

clear pathways from running program activities to understanding program results; It is often not so straightforward and simple. Yet there is often pressure (including from back-donors) to illustrate concrete results from program interventions. Further, many programs deal with complex issues where change takes a long time and does not always move forward as intended. Accounting for the reality of how change happens, including backlash where power was challenged, is important but not always fully understood or appreciated. The evaluations at Akina Mama wa Afrika that were carried out after each cohort of the feminist leadership development programme only captured the immediate results. These immediate results that were captured focused on development partner requirements. Yet, a long-term approach would have enabled a more liberatory exploration of impact that supports transformation at all levels.

Madsen et al<sup>88</sup> also add that while the importance of leadership development programming for both men and women is clear, several articles emphasise the beneficial impact of women-only opportunities. Leadership models developed and used by men will not suffice as the only examples for women. Leadership development programs geared specifically toward women are needed. The writers argue that women’s leadership development programs should be designed to “adequately

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85. Batliwala S, & Pittman Alex.2010. “Capturing Change in Women’s Realities: A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks and Approaches.” Toronto: AWID. <https://www.awid.org/publications/capturing-change-womens-realities>

86. Dighe, S., & Sarode, T. (2019). Evaluation in the Global South: Practises, Problems, and Prospects. *Reconsidering Development*, 6(1). Retrieved from <https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/reconsidering/article/view/2077>

87. Wakefield and Koerppen (2017) Applying Feminist Principles to Program Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning available at <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620318/dp-feminist-principles-meal-260717-en.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y> accessed 7th Jan 2022

88. Susan R. Madsen and Maureen S. Andrade Unconscious gender bias: Implications for Women’s Leadership Development, *Journal of leadership studies*, Volume 12, Number 1, 2018 available at [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maureen\\_Andrade/publication/325914582\\_Unconscious\\_Gender\\_Bias\\_Implications\\_for\\_Women’s\\_Leadership\\_Development/links/5c6151d945851582c3ddb855/Unconscious-Gender-Bias-Implications-for-Womens-Leadership-Development.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maureen_Andrade/publication/325914582_Unconscious_Gender_Bias_Implications_for_Women’s_Leadership_Development/links/5c6151d945851582c3ddb855/Unconscious-Gender-Bias-Implications-for-Womens-Leadership-Development.pdf)



address the organisational realities women face” and “foster in participants a sustained capacity for leadership.” The sustained capacity for leadership can only be achieved using reflective research that is conducted periodically.

Therefore, reviewing and opening discussions on the gains of feminist leadership development in Africa should be complemented by the documentation of Herstories that enhance the visibility of visionary, inspiring, radical feminist transformative leaders. This will shift oppressive power dynamics and will advance gender and social justice, which is now more necessary than ever. The overall goal is to look at the gains of feminist leadership development and the themes that have emerged over the years. These gains can then inform and shape the future of feminist leadership development and how it is weaved, implemented, and monitored. Furthermore, this paper hopes to provide a framework for feminist leadership development to harness leadership development that advances gender and social justice.

### 3. Key Research Objectives

The research has the following specific objectives:

- » To determine how feminist leadership development was done by AMwA in the last five years – by reviewing existing programmes, practice, implementation, and impact.
- » To analyse the gains, challenges and lessons learned.
- » To establish emerging trends and future aspirations

### 4. Research Questions

The guiding research questions include some of the following:

1. What are the existing models of feminist leadership development in AMwA?
2. What are the emerging trends and what are the deviations?
3. What is the contribution of feminist leadership development to gender and social justice?
4. What are some of the gender-related impediments that diminish feminist leadership development; and
5. What opportunities exist for feminist leadership development in Uganda?

### 5. Theoretical Framework

The research seeks to explore the criticality of feminist leadership development from a feminist theory standpoint. The exploration will draw from literature review, key informant interviews, and personal experience as an insider-outsider.

### 6. Methodology

The research is majorly a desk review, with a few anecdotal experiences from alumni of the feminist leadership development programme and leadership enthusiasts who are keen to see the growth of this sector.

### 7. Discussion and Analysis

This section analyses three similar but diverse programmes that were implemented by AMwA in the last five years, under the African Women’s Leadership Institute. This section identifies common threads, areas of divergence, and the gaps that have emerged in the different



programmes that can be attributed to the design and implementation. AMwA's African Women's Leadership Institute provides an intensive 5-day curriculum that equips young and women leaders with leadership capabilities. The Institute's focus is on imparting knowledge, skills, and unveiling the lived realities of women to raise political consciousness and agency. AWLI participants work with faculty and mentors to develop their personal development plans at the individual level and to develop action plans at the collective level. The Institute also acts as a space to build peer networks needed for advancing feminist leaders. This programme attracts young, middle, and high-level civic and political actors from the African continent.

#### **A. TuWezeshe Akina Dada, Swahili for 'Empowering our Sisters'**

TuWezeshe is a feminist leadership development programme whose pilot was implemented, between 2016 and 2019, as part of a larger programme to address sexual and gender-based violence. The TuWezeshe programme was implemented by a consortium led by the Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD) based in the United Kingdom, along with three consortium partners: Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) in Uganda, the Sub-Saharan Advisory Panel (SSAP) in Wales and Somaliland and the Children's Dignity Forum (CDF) in Tanzania. The programme was established in 2016 and funded by Comic Relief's Common Ground Initiative.

TuWezeshe comprised of four components: feminist leadership training, fellowship networks, mentorship, and the social action grant. Feminist leadership training comprised

of a five-day residential training where fellows learn practical feminist leadership skills, build confidence, and gain knowledge of their rights. Fellowship networks, also known as the TuWezeshe sisterhoods, are country-specific networks that provide fellows with the opportunity to draw encouragement and inspiration from one another throughout their leadership and advocacy journey. In terms of mentorship, fellows are paired with experienced and established women leaders in various fields to receive support, advice, and networking opportunities. The last component is the Social Action Grant. Upon completing the leadership training, fellows are provided with a £500 grant to initiate their own social action projects, which are typically completed within a year. Through this programme, fellows learned to shape the agenda on VAWG, built networks and contributed to national and international platforms.

An evaluation<sup>89</sup> of the TuWezeshe Akina Dada, found that TuWezeshe effectively empowered fellows to advocate for their rights and the rights of others; fellows significantly increased their confidence across all dimensions of leadership: including their understanding of VAWG, their public speaking skills, and their confidence to create social change through activism.

However, the areas for improvement & recommendations included training time, which was not enough for fellows to digest all the new information they were receiving. Most stakeholders suggested extending and breaking the training down into shorter sessions throughout the programme. Stakeholders also suggested having a training refresher halfway through or at the end of the Social Action

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89. Manuas (2020) TuWezeshe Akina Dada Final Programme Evaluation Report



Projects (SAP). Although many fellows continued SAP activities or similar interventions after the fellowship, stakeholders generally thought that the training fell short in developing skills to ensure the continuation of the SAPs beyond TuWezeshe. Fellows and mentors thought that most projects had a large positive impact on the communities that they were implemented in.

Further, stakeholders suggested expanding training content primarily around budgeting, advertisement, advocacy, and fundraising. Further, it was acknowledged that the training triggered fellows' experiences of VAWG and therefore psychological support should be better embedded in the design of the TuWezeshe. Fellows also wanted more support around identity and sexual orientation, as these topics are taboo in African communities. In addition to more in-house psychosocial support, stakeholders suggested connecting fellows to external resources for additional support, such as online counselling services. Stakeholders agreed that fellows and mentors had different expectations around the time commitment that the mentorship would entail. Stakeholders generally recommended improving the selection of mentors and providing a shorter version of the leadership training to mentors to harmonise mentorship skills and expectations. There was also a suggestion to allow fellows to propose external mentors, such as professors or past mentors.

### **B. AMWA/ HIVOS Women's Leadership Development 2017-2020: Under Decent Work for Women Programme**

In this second case study, we look at the feminist leadership development programme that was implemented by AMWA, with support from Hivos East Africa, as part of the decent work for women agenda that specifically

targeted women in the horticulture sector. A 2016 baseline report commissioned by Hivos East Africa titled, *"Women's Rights in the Horticulture Industry"* revealed that power and control over resources in the horticulture industry is entrenched in the hands of men. Women's labour is mainly concentrated in the lower levels of the value chain, while men take up positions of leadership. Women's health is also not prioritised as they are not given safety equipment, exposing them to hazardous chemicals.

The AMWA/ Hivos Feminist Leadership Development programme comprised of feminist leadership training that involved a five-day training of trainers, where participants are equipped with feminist leadership knowledge and skills, with strategies on how to support their workplaces to strengthen gender responsiveness at the workplace, in policy and legal reform initiatives, and in network and collaboration with the women's movement. Participants are also encouraged to strengthen their peer network as part of building community. Through this programme, participants contribute to a decent work agenda.

The Citizen Agency Consortium (CAC), consisting of Hivos, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and Article 19, commissioned an End-Term Evaluation (ETE) as part of the five-year CAC strategic partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Dialogue and Dissent framework (2016- 2020). The Decent Work for Women (DW4W) project was implemented in Eastern and Southern Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia) and in the Netherlands. The programme focused on fair wages, safety and security at the workplace, good working conditions, and participation in decision-



making, particularly targeting women in the horticulture sector.

The findings of the evaluation highlighted various power dimensions: 'Power within', 'Power to' and 'Power with'. 'Power within' is exemplified through self-confidence, positive self-image, and the ability to make choices concerning one's future, and stand up for their rights. Their self-image improved, but the ability to make decisions concerning one's future remained weak. In terms of 'Power to', this form of power is seen by the ability to convert knowledge and skills into concrete actions, W@W focused on knowledge, awareness-raising, and leadership skills. 'Power to' was more pronounced in the limited number of women that have benefited directly from training. The ability to convert knowledge and skills into concrete action is hampered by the difficult bargaining environment. In terms of 'Power with', Social and political power was observed through the ability to organise to influence decision making and collective action. There was an observable ability to make decisions and participate in decision making, albeit at a slow pace. For example, women workers' committees showed varying levels of engagement and commitment.<sup>90</sup>

### **C. AMWA/ UN Women Feminist Leadership Development**

The third and final intervention that offers critical lessons is the feminist leadership development cohort that was implemented by AMWA and supported by the UN Women Eastern and Southern Africa (ESARO) office in 2019.

The leadership development encompassed a five-day training, which was held in March 2019. The training involved peer-to-peer mentorship as a cohort, coaching sessions from an external entity and created spaces for networking and movement building. The leadership development programme targeted 25 participants from 12 countries.

An evaluation commissioned by Akina Mama wa Afrika and conducted by Donnelly Mwachi<sup>91</sup> sought to establish the extent to which the AWLI participants self-reported to: (a) have been satisfied with the content of the training, (b) gained new knowledge and skills hence deepening their feminist leadership, (c) measure shifts and changes in individual behavior (adaptation and application of skills) in the performance setting as a result of AWLI, and (d) measure changes in organizational and community impact as a result of AWLI.

The training evaluation drew from the Kirkpatrick Model (1955) conceptual framework on the four steps for evaluating learning. The modified study framework assumes that if learners were satisfied with the training, they will demonstrate some level of confidence based on the knowledge and skills acquired. If this is deemed to be true, then knowledge and skills were acquired in the process.

Generally, 63.2% of the targeted respondents have been advancing women's rights for more than five years. In regard to participants' satisfaction, 92.7% of the respondents reported having been satisfied with the training.

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90. ACE Europe / End -Term Evaluation CAC- DW4W programme / Final Country Report Uganda

91. Akina Mama wa Afrika and Donnelly Mwachi (2020)



Those who were not satisfied cited the lack of customisation of the training to address their immediate needs, such as upskilling in resource mobilisation and on how to adapt to the changing contexts in relation to the feminism ecosystem. Additionally, 93.1% of the respondents revealed that the training was useful and relevant for advancing their personal and organisational development goals.

Specifically, knowledge gained from the personal development module was cited as being the most useful and relevant for advancing their personal growth, while the feminist theory module was cited as the most useful in advancing their organisational goals and aspirations. Further, 80.8% of the respondents reported having acquired new knowledge and skills because of the training. 78.9% of the participants acquired new knowledge and skills to advance their personal development agenda, while 82.6% reported having acquired new knowledge and skills to advance their organisation's development agenda. Overall, knowledge and skills acquired for personal development were appreciated by most (67.8%). On the other hand, in terms of advancing organisation development goals, the knowledge acquired from the feminist theory module was appreciated by most of the participants (57.1%).

The evaluation findings reveal that most of the participants demonstrated confidence after the training; 78.8% of the respondents reported having confidence after the training, compared to 32.5% who report having it prior to the training. For those who reported being confident, they cited various reasons: the majority (35.3%) reported that they felt adept at building partnerships and collaborations for successful resource mobilisation, (32.4%) felt

that the existing support of women mentors should continue so that they develop at both a personal and professional level.

At a personal level, personal development and transformational leadership were cited as important modules. This is not to say that other modules were not as useful. The study pre-empted that this could be because of individual personal goals. The study has led the participants to become self-aware, which means they understand their strengths and weaknesses, and their leadership styles. This has manifested in some participants re-evaluating their leadership styles, including changing their approaches and behaviour. The feminist leadership development programme also ignited a thirst for further learning prompting a group to go back to college to deepen their knowledge on women's rights issues. Personal development (94.74%) and transformational leadership (63.16%) were reported to be the most implemented modules. Feminist theory (26.3%) and Women's rights (26.3%) modules were the least cited.

At an organisational level, transformational leadership and women's human rights were cited as important modules towards advancing organisational goals. As a result of the training, participants were able to initiate and strengthen social change and movement building. In this regard, a total of 3,763 women were reported to have been reached by the participants. Proposal writing skills were also enhanced with a group of the participants citing specific examples of how this was applied within their respective organisations. Championing women's issues in existing political spaces, mostly dominated by men, was also evident. Additionally, there was also a shift towards gender transformative programming and implementation to make



organisations more inclusive and more gender responsive. Policies and guidelines have been revised to incorporate issues affecting women employees. Transformational leadership was cited as the most (73.68%) implemented, followed by women's human rights (42.11%) and then feminist advocacy and movement building (42.11%).

Despite these achievements, political, social, and economic factors still play a critical role in terms of how the knowledge acquired is put into use; this mostly affects those who are new in the feminism ecosystem. Lastly, bureaucratic structures in organisations also acted as a hindrance towards accelerating proposed changes targeting women in organisations.

## Conclusions and Emerging Themes

What emerges from the findings is that while the five-day training provides sufficient foundation for one to start on a journey of feminist leadership, for some participants the intensity of the programme may inhibit their ability to grasp the concepts. It is therefore critical that a phased programme is considered which may include a hybrid arrangement to start off with a physical five-day training on the foundational modules and then other modules can be covered subsequently. The training content is also a significant contributor to the success of the leadership development programme. Modules such as personal development, feminist theory, and feminist leadership were found to enormously inform the raising of feminist political consciousness.

Another critical part of feminist leadership development includes the mentorship and coaching sessions that are part of the programme. In the cohorts where this aspect

was not well established, the impact was felt. Future programmes need to integrate a stronger and well-designed mentorship and coaching aspect. Further, given the context, feminist leadership development needs to integrate aspects of psychosocial support.

There is also a need to strengthen the pre- and post-training evaluations to reflect the results/outcomes. A systematic documentation of Herstories, coupled with other feminist research, will ensure that the feminist leadership development is continuously updated according to new emerging trends.

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