

# perspectives

Issue 1  
June 2021

POLITICAL ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

AFRICA

## African Feminisms Across Generations



This edition of **Perspectives Africa** is published jointly by the offices of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in sub-Saharan Africa.



## Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a publicly funded institution that is affiliated with but intellectually independent from the German Green party. From our headquarters in Berlin and over 30 overseas offices, we promote civic participation in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Africa concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, gender democracy and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention and search for solutions to the challenges of environmental degradation and the depletion of resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating information, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Africa and Europe, and supporting global dialogue.

# Contents

- 4** Editorial: African Feminisms Across Generations
- 7** A Critique of Africa's Post-Colonial Freedoms Through a Feminist Lens: Challenging Patriarchy and Assessing the Gains  
Furaha Joy Sekai Saungweme
- 13** Senegalese Feminism Across Generations: From Radicalism to a More Inclusive Feminism  
Dr Barrel Gueye and Dr Selly Bâ
- 18** Tracing the Development of Feminist Ideas Through Four Senegalese Women Writers' Novels: Toward an Intergenerational Dialogue  
Dr Fatoumata Keita
- 23** **Conversation**  
Intergenerational Feminist Organising and Solidarity in South Africa: A Conversation  
Mase Ramaru and Elsbeth Engelbrecht
- 29** **Interview**  
Are Different Generations of Nigerian Feminists Ready to Join Forces?  
Nkoyo Toyo and OluTimehin Adegbeye
- 36** Can We Imagine a Feminist Future Within Religion?  
Wanjiru Nguhi
- 42** Living Egalitarianism: Recentring the Indigenous Matricentric in Africa  
Bernedette Muthien
- 50** Testimony to the Power of African Feminists Across Time and Space  
Njeri Kabeberi
- 56** Practical Gender Interests (Still) Matter  
Nothando Maphalala

# African Feminisms Across Generations

Throughout the history of social and political movements in African societies, generations of women have, in one way or another, worked to oppose patriarchal domination, laws and practices in the pursuit of gender equality; advocating for their equal participation in all aspects of social, economic and political life. Despite this tradition of women-centred and anti-patriarchal organising, it is only in the last few decades, partly due to efforts to entrench women's emancipation and gender equality in development goals, that feminism in Africa has evolved as an explicit ideological and political concept.

African feminist movements have, over the ages, grown parallel to feminism(s) in the global North and have often contested the space in order to establish themselves on the terms of African women and in response to the needs of African people. Where older generations of feminists had been wary of the label "feminism", the younger, Afropolitan generation exhibits less ambivalence towards taking up an explicitly feminist cause. Chimamanda Adichie's call that "We all should be feminist" illustrates the attitude of a new generation of feminists in and for Africa.

As the articles in this publication reflect, various forms of Afrocentric feminism have emerged over time and represent steady inroads in the advancement of women's rights, and sexual and gender rights more broadly, in Africa across generations. These diverse yet interconnected forms of feminism have led to the adoption of laws, policies and treatises on women's rights and gender equality with regard to, among others, representation and participation in political office and access to healthcare, education and the economy. Emphasis has also been placed on addressing sexual and gender inequality from the perspective of

power relations, articulating a philosophy and politics that not only advocate for substantive equality between men and women but also challenge the heteronormativity of the post-colonial state. This draws attention to the need to contest traditional gender roles and divisions of labour as well as to advance fundamental structural change for women, and for sexual and gender minorities, to be full and equal actors in development processes in Africa.

Despite the eclecticism and diversity of African feminisms across generations, and notwithstanding their many achievements, gender oppression – and sexual and gender-based violence, in particular – remain stark realities for women and for vulnerable groups on the continent, where many face multiple and intersecting barriers to economic, political, social and legal equality. Attaining true gender democracy and equality also means pursuing an African decolonial dialogue around the issues that steadfastly impede the attainment of gender justice in African societies.

This edition of *Perspectives* is a collaboration between the Gender Focal Persons (HBF staff members who serve as resource persons on gender issues) from our four offices in Africa and the Africa Division at our head office in Berlin. The idea for the edition was born out of a strategy to collectively develop an approach to gender-related political goals that is rooted in feminist realities, thinking and narratives specific to the African continent. The need to reflect on, analyse and document the evolution of African feminisms emerged out of this. This edition aims to do just that by highlighting the histories of women's anti-patriarchal struggles in Africa and the various forms of feminist action that African



activists have taken up to address both persistent and new threats to women's rights and gender justice. It also aims to reflect on lessons learned from African feminist practices for current and future generations across the region.

The result is a wide range of articles from African feminists who, from diverse perspectives and a range of regional vantage points, engage with the topic of African Feminisms Across Generations. The articles draw on the various histories and features of anti-patriarchal struggles, approaches to these struggles, and their implications for inter-generational feminist thinking and activism in the contemporary African context.

The edition commences with a critique of post-colonial freedoms by Furaha Joy Sekai Saungweme which explores the common thread of patriarchy that runs from the liberation movements against racial oppression to post-colonial times. The article questions why women, as critical catalysts for change in the struggle against colonialism and in the fight for the attainment of rights in post-colonial Africa, continue to live under conditions of oppression linked to persistent institutional and structural inequalities.

Dr Barrel Gueye and Dr Selly Bâ provide a historical perspective on women's activism as they explore and compare three waves of feminist evolution in Senegal. While these waves share a common goal of fighting against male supremacy, each has a unique character, ideology and strategy to address the challenges of the times. The authors argue that each wave of feminist activism has contributed positively to women's status in Senegal while also facing specific obstacles and limitations to enabling fundamental change in the lives of Senegalese women.

Another perspective from Senegal is that of Dr Fatoumata Keita, who reflects on the development of feminist ideas through the writings of four women authors. Dr Keita argues that, although written from different times and contexts, the authors' texts offer teachings that can inspire and enrich current feminist debates, not only in the Senegalese context but across the globe.

Two conversational articles, one from South Africa and the other from Nigeria, turn the focus towards key debates within present-day feminist movements from a cross-generational perspective. In the first, a conversation between Mase Ramaru and

*Young women lead a protest in Cape Town in September 2019 after a series of horrendous murders of women and girls sparked outrage against high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa and the government's failure to curb it.*

© Nicky Newman

Elsbeth Engelbrecht explores the complexities of intergenerational feminist relations and how to think through possibilities for intergenerational solidarities. The second article is an interview by Monika Umunna with Nkoyo Toyo and OluTimehin Adegbeye that explores feminism and gender rights activism, past and present, and how different generations assess one another's struggles and achievements. The interview engages with some of the ideological tensions between older, more traditional women's rights feminists and a younger feminist generation that speaks to issues of intersectionality, religion and queer rights and the importance of forging alliances across these tensions.

In her article, Wanjiru Nguhi asks the provocative question of whether we can imagine a feminist future within religion, interrogating the patriarchal nature of Christianity and its implications for African feminism and feminists. Bernedette Muthien provides a historical account of the power of oft-overlooked matricentric indigenous societies and how their practices are claimed by indigenous feminists in struggles for post-patriarchal egalitarianisms. Njeri Kabeberi's article reflects on the lives of five courageous feminists from southern and eastern Africa whose lives bear testimony to the power of feminist, anti-patriarchal struggles in Africa across the span

of 300 years. In the final article of this rich collection, Nothando Maphalala focuses on the place, power and problematics of Motherism as a basis for feminist action in contemporary African feminism.

We hope that the reflections, insights and analyses presented in these articles by African feminist scholars, researchers and activists will stimulate further thinking on African-centred perspectives and inspire feminist action for the social, political and economic betterment of women and marginalised communities across Africa.

**Paula Assubuji**

Programme Manager, Cape Town office

**Selly Bâ**

Programme Officer, Dakar office

**Nicola Egelhof**

Project Officer, Africa Division, Berlin office

**Caroline Kioko**

Programme Coordinator, Nairobi office

**Claudia Lopes**

Programme Manager, Cape Town office

**Monika Umunna**

Programme coordinator, Abuja office

**Melanie Judge** (Guest Editor)

# A Critique of Africa's Post-Colonial Freedoms Through a Feminist Lens: Challenging Patriarchy and Assessing the Gains

Furaha Joy Sekai Saungweme

This article considers the multiple roles that women activists have occupied in two different contexts: firstly, in the fight against colonialism, as co-liberators alongside their male counterparts, and secondly, present-day feminist activists (with limited support from their male counterparts) who challenge both political and patriarchal forms of oppression that are harmful to women. These two contexts reveal similarities and differences in the role of women under conditions of oppression that are conducive to institutional and structural inequality, with women being the first casualties. African women's fight against racial oppression under colonialism was a fight for fundamental freedoms that was entrenched in international human rights, largely in the form of civil, political and socio-economic rights. However, it is debatable whether those hard-fought freedoms are experienced and enjoyed by the average woman today.

This article proposes that existing power structures in present-day African governments – which were largely birthed in “liberation movements” against racial oppression and fought for by women and men – have done little to advance feminist movements. Demands for equality, bodily integrity and dignity are ongoing as women confront a different kind of oppressor who perpetuates their marginalisation in political, socio-cultural and economic spaces. Patriarchy is the common thread of both colonial and post-colonial times.

Women played a central role in the liberation struggles that catapulted African nations from the bondage of colonialism

to political emancipation. Women fought alongside men in the bushes, organised marches in towns and cities, fundraised for the liberation movements, became exiles, and raised children from birth to adulthood in the midst of bullets, hand grenades, bombings, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments, while also being subjected to unremunerated commercial and domestic labour. The burden invariably fell on women to teach their children to appreciate the battles being fought for political freedom, and to revolt against oppressive racist systems that sought to dehumanise the very concepts of African pride and heritage.

A critical analysis of women's roles during this period refutes as blatantly false any assertion that they were passive or uninvolved. Yet it is also true that these fierce and resilient women, who fought alongside men in the liberation trenches, were indiscriminately raped, beaten, abused and marginalised. The intricacies of patriarchy in the context of racial and political subjugation created a complex existence for women – as victims, survivors, leaders, nurturers, guerrilla fighters and social agitators – that continues to fan the flames of African feminism.

The article asserts that the challenges encountered by women during the colonial era, of being deliberately positioned as subservient to men, propelled them to join these liberation movements. Yet the challenges of gender-based inequality and violence rooted in colonialism continued into present-day African patriarchal governance. Furthermore, post-colonial concepts like “gender mainstreaming”<sup>1</sup> and the sprinkling of female candidates in political positions have failed to address the deep-rooted inequalities which African women



**Furaha Joy Sekai Saungweme** is a lawyer and the founder of Africa End Sexual Harassment Initiative (AESHI), a law-reform and social-movement project creating regional dialogue on sexual harassment and calling for the development of a regional model law on sexual harassment for Africa. She is a fellow of Women Leaders for the World, a project of the California-based How Women Lead, which promotes women in leadership. She sits on the editorial board of the Berkeley Center on Comparative Equality and Anti-Discrimination Law and is part of the Berkeley COVID-19 Equality Law Working Group. Furaha has written widely on democracy, gender and socio-economic rights in Africa, presenting research papers and discussions at academic institutions in Africa, Europe and the USA.

were subjected to during colonialism and in the liberation struggles.

These struggles have not gone far enough to shift the demographics of access to, and the enjoyment of, basic rights that are still enjoyed by a few at the expense of many. If this assertion is not true, then why

---

Prior to the colonial era, women's voices in decision-making processes in African societies were embedded in the cultural values and commercial activities of communities where women were central figures.

---

has only one African country to date boasted a woman as its elected president? Why do we still have women earning the accolades of the "gatekeepers of patriarchy" in political organisations, women whose influence seems limited to defending – usually by their silence and inaction – the continued subjugation and degradation of women and girls? Why are the most egregious forms of gender-based violence met with deafening silence from prominent women's organisations and networks? And why, if women were so clearly instrumental in the emancipation of Africa from colonial oppression, are they still in an obvious fight for the most fundamental rights?<sup>2</sup> Never have these questions been more poignant than in the time of Covid-19 which has exacerbated and amplified the conditions that cement women's political and socio-economic exclusion.

## Colonialism amplified feminist activism and consciousness

Prior to the colonial era, women's voices in decision-making processes in African societies were embedded in the cultural values and commercial activities of communities where women were central figures.<sup>3</sup> Yoruba women provide a good illustration of women as partners in commercial activities such as long-distance trade.<sup>4</sup> As they negotiated with foreign and local traders and merchants, these roles also fostered political skills to preserve economic stability and peaceful relations in their communities. Because of the influential positions they held and the wealth they had acquired, these Yor-

uba women enjoyed privilege and power.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that there was no patriarchy prior to colonialism, nor that men and women were equal. Where women have enjoyed some degree of independence, the responses of men ranged from acceptance to accusations of witchcraft.<sup>6</sup> But the level of patriarchy and equality differed from one society to another, and there was certainly some element of matriarchal hegemony that was diminished by colonial structures. For example, pre-colonial pastoralist women in northern Kenya were responsible for herding small livestock and processing primary products such as milk, meat and skins, and they exercised considerable power and influence over the distribution and exchange of these products. However, the Kenyan colonial government sought to integrate this pastoralist way of life and social structure into the colonial economy.<sup>7</sup> As a result, women lost the status, power and dignity they derived from their pastoralist roles. Suffice to say that, with new power structures that placed them at the fringes of social, political and economic decision-making, colonialism redefined the role of most women in African societies. Land concessions and loss of control of their economy effectively excluded women from meaningful participation in African societies and led to an unfamiliar economic dependence on men. As women lost their positions in the society, a harmful form of traditional patriarchy became entrenched in the African way of life through the imposition of colonialism.<sup>8</sup>

Matriarchal hegemony was replaced by a new kind of male domination under the camouflage of racial oppression. Patriarchy and colonialism changed gender dynamics and introduced unprecedented levels of gender inequality with economic and social consequences. When European colonial powers negotiated only with male chiefs on key economic issues like oversight of taxes and governance, the role of female chiefs decreased. In Nigeria, as the economy became more and more dependent on cash crops for exports, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnuts (peanuts) and palm oil. This pushed women into the background and into the informal economy.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the customary land-tenure systems that had provided women across Africa with access to land were disrupted by land commercialisation that favoured those who made money from the sale of cash crops.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup>"Mothers of the Revolution" by artist Yasmin Elnour honours Sudanese activist Jalila Khamis Kuku who fights for the victims of military violence despite constant government intimidation, censorship and surveillance. Artwork courtesy of Yasmin Elnour. Follow Yasmin on Instagram: @kandaka.khronicles.





Insofar as slavery and colonialism can be identified as pathways to gender inequality, the emergence of feminism can also be linked to a collective resistance by women against a patriarchal system of governance rooted in colonialist structures that excluded them because of their race and gender. Indeed, if feminism is the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes,<sup>11</sup> patriarchy is the antithesis of feminism. Even a benevolent patriarchy conflicts with feminist theory as it accommodates only some women in positions of power while leaving the rest behind.

By joining the liberation struggles against colonialism, women – consciously or subconsciously – embraced the fundamental principles that are embodied in feminist activism: they acted from their desire

---

The emergence of feminism can also be linked to a collective resistance by women against a patriarchal system of governance rooted in colonialist structures

---

for the fruits of substantive equality. Women were game-changers in fighting against the racial and gender oppression of colonialism. For example, Bibi Titi Mohamed recruited at least 5 000 members to the women's wing of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). She accomplished this in a short period by tirelessly mobilising women's networks through rallies, marches and fundraising events.<sup>12</sup>

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, born in 1900, was only 19 when she left her home in Nigeria to further her studies in England. She returned a few years later and became active politically, founding the Women's Union of Abeokuta.<sup>13</sup> Her organisation challenged corruption and unjust taxes as well as the lack of women's representation in decision-making structures.<sup>14</sup>

Mabel Dove Danquah of Ghana is another prime example of a feminist and political activist mobilising against colonial powers. Through her writing and journalism, she contributed to the struggle for independence through the main political party, the Convention People's Party. She was commended for her efforts by its leader, Kwame Nkrumah. In 1954, she became the first African woman to be elected to parliament by popular vote.<sup>15</sup>

The socially constructed inequalities between men and women that took root during colonialism worsened during the liberation struggles across Africa, despite women's participation in those struggles. This is demonstrated by widespread acts of gender-based violence in the form of rapes and beatings, exclusion from decision-making, and the general marginalisation of women by their male comrades.

The women who remained in the villages also played central roles in this period, acting as informants for the liberation movements, organising demonstrations, providing hideouts, and maintaining the home environment. Yet they too were the targets of rape, by both colonial apologists and members of the liberation movements.

Even after independence, the disregard and diminishment of women's participation in liberation struggles were reflected in the naming of major institutions and infrastructure. The names and faces of male liberators were affixed to universities, airports, roads, business centres and national currencies. Women were rarely afforded the same level of national recognition and respect.

## Contemporary African political structures and feminism

As noted in the previous section, colonialism had social, economic and political consequences for women in terms of their marginalization and exclusion from power. These consequences were woven into the social and political fabric of liberation struggles, as evidenced in the sex based and gender-based discriminations that women became increasingly subjected to and that were normalised by the political structures who led the liberation struggles in different African countries. Post-colonial gender constructs of men and women continued to position women as inferior to men and accorded them the status of minors. Guardianship and marriage laws often took away women's ability to make decisions for themselves with regard to, for example, land rights, property rights, sexual health and reproductive rights, and even the right not to be raped in marriage.

In response, African feminists took up their position to challenge the patriarchal structures embedded in African govern-

ments that were reflected in their policies, laws and practices. In the Charter of Feminist Principles, African feminists declared that, “[b]y naming ourselves as feminists we politicise the struggle for women’s rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action”.<sup>16</sup>

The harms inflicted by colonialism and the inequalities arising from that dark era are not easily reversed. The 2018 Global Gender Gap Index reported that it would take 135 years to close the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa and nearly 153 years in North Africa, where the influence of religious systems dictates the societal and economic position of women.<sup>17</sup>

African feminists have fought for the rights of the girl child and the inequalities she suffers as a result of abusive patriarchal culture and discriminatory laws and practices.<sup>18</sup> Clear examples include child marriages, lack of access to education, and the inequality between boys and girls that starts in primary school and widens throughout the educational process. Although Africa continues to register the highest relative increase in total enrolment in primary education among regions, the rate of enrolment for girls is lower than the rate for boys.<sup>19</sup>

Statistics vary from country to country in Africa. For instance, the government of Guinea embarked on a national strategy to

prioritise girls’ education and introduced reproductive care for pregnant girls. At the other end of the spectrum is Tanzania, led by a government that implements policies detrimental to the rights of girls and in complete conflict with feminist aspirations for equality, such as banning pregnant girls from completing their education. In addition, “pregnancy rates for young women with no education are 52 percent, versus only 10 percent for young women with secondary or higher education”.<sup>20</sup>

Another example of state-sanctioned disempowerment and degradation of women is demonstrated by anti-feminist governments. Gender-based violence is wielded against women who are themselves politically active or who may only be related to those whom the government has targeted as a means to silence critics, the media, and members of opposition parties. This practice is common in despotic countries like Zimbabwe, where abductions of women political activists often result in sexual abuse and rape. It is rare for African governments to intervene to prevent widespread abuse of women, especially when it is unleashed by state security forces or through politically driven violence. A recent example to the contrary is the inauguration of a Gender-Based Violence Management Committee by President Muhammadu Buhari and the government of Nigeria in response to gender-based violence that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup>



*Women's Resistance March in Burundi in 2015 led by activist Ketty Nivyabandi. Photo: Joseph Ndayisenga, supplied by Ketty Nivyabandi.*

## Conclusion

This article has offered insight into the roles of women in various historical contexts. In pre-colonial Africa, women's worth and dignity were validated by the critical contributions they made as drivers of social cohesion, as decision-makers in the home, and as respected stakeholders of economic resources from land to food. Colonialism brought significant setbacks and undermined women in their previously revered roles.<sup>22</sup> These losses have been difficult to overcome. Even as women warriors joined arms with their male comrades or supported the anti-colonial struggle from their homes, they were subjected to gender-based violence and discriminatory treatment.

It can be argued that feminists in post-colonial Africa have made successful inroads in the public discourse on gender

equality. Yet the social and economic effects emanating from pre-colonial Africa still resonate in forms of female disempowerment in the lives of women and girl children. Feminist discourse has strengthened the public condemnation of child marriage, even though this is still widely practised. Women's and girls' right to education is widely acknowledged, even though statistics show that girls enrol at lower rates than boys and, because of pregnancy and domestic work, are more likely to drop out. And although state-sponsored violence is still meted out against women, it now meets with international condemnation and the threat of African leaders being hauled before regional and international criminal courts. The feminist movement has made some measurable gains, but more is required for equality, dignity and opportunity to be availed to all. ■■■

- 1 Josephine Ahikire, "African Feminism in Context: Reflections on the Legitimation Battles, Victories and Reversals," *Feminist Africa* 19 (2014): 7–23, [http://www.agi.ac.za/sites/default/files/image\\_tool/images/429/feminist\\_africa\\_journals/archive/02/features\\_-\\_african\\_feminism\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_century\\_-\\_a\\_reflection\\_on\\_ugandagos\\_victories\\_battles\\_and\\_reversals.pdf](http://www.agi.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/429/feminist_africa_journals/archive/02/features_-_african_feminism_in_the_21st_century_-_a_reflection_on_ugandagos_victories_battles_and_reversals.pdf).
- 2 Gumisai Mutume, "African Women Battle for Equality," *Africa Renewal* (July 2005), <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2005/african-women-battle-equality>.
- 3 Niara Sudarkasa, "'The Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 91–103.
- 4 An ethnic group in West Africa, mainly in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and parts of Ghana.
- 5 Abidemi Abiola Isola and Bukola A. Alao, "African Women's Leadership Roles Historically," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 24, no. 9, ser. 5 (September 2019), 107–118, <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2024%20Issue9/Series-5/B2409050508.pdf>.
- 6 Onaiwu Ogbomo, "Women, Power and Society in Pre-colonial Africa," *Lagos Historical Review* 5 (2005), 49–74.
- 7 Fatuma B. Guyo, "Colonial and Post-Colonial Changes and Impact on Pastoral Women's Roles and Status," *Pastoralism* 7, no. 13 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-017-0076-2>.
- 8 Guyo, "Colonial and Post-Colonial Changes".
- 9 Shiro Wachira, "Financial Inclusion is Key to Tackling Africa's Gender Inequality," *World Economic Forum*, 13 July 2018, accessed 28 April 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/financial-equality-for-africa-s-women-farmers>.
- 10 Isola and Alao, "African Women's Leadership".
- 11 Kathy Caprino, "What Is Feminism, and Why Do So Many Women and Men Hate It?" *Forbes*, 8 March 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2017/03/08/what-is-feminism-and-why-do-so-many-women-and-men-hate-it/?sh=57894ae87e8e>.
- 12 Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, "Africa Has Forgotten the Women Leaders of Its Independence Struggle," *Quartz Africa*, 16 March 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1574284/africas-women-have-been-forgotten-from-its-independence-history>.
- 13 Alaba Onajin and Obioma Ofoego, "Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti: and the Women's Union of Abeokuta," *UNESCO Series on Women in African History*, January 2014, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230929?posInSet=1&queryId=ca2d14da-6436-43b4-a71d-c1d07d1e7765>.
- 14 Asiedu, "Africa has forgotten".
- 15 Asiedu, "Africa has forgotten".
- 16 "Preamble to the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists," *African Women's Development Fund* (2006), <http://www.africanfeministforum.com/feminist-charter-preamble>.
- 17 World Economic Forum, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2018", World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018>.
- 18 The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was adopted by the African Union (then the Organisation of African Unity) in 1990 and came into force in 1999.
- 19 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2018".
- 20 World Bank, "Factsheet: Tanzania Secondary Education Quality Improvement Program (SEQUIP)," *World Bank*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2020/03/31/tanzania-secondary-education-quality-improvement-program-sequip>.
- 21 Temilade, "President Buhari Inaugurates Gender-Based Violence Management Committee," *Courtroom Mail*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.courtroommail.com/president-buhari-inaugurates-gender-based-violence-management-committee>.
- 22 Ogbomo, "Women, Power and Society".

# Senegalese Feminism Across Generations: From Radicalism to a More Inclusive Feminism

Dr Barrel Gueye and Dr Selly Bâ

The feminist movement in Senegal can be traced through the creation of women's groups and associations. The first women's structure was the *Union des Femmes Sénégalaises* (UFS) in 1956, which was legally recognised in 1958, and became part of the Senegalese Progressive Union in 1960. The UFS was followed by many others, such as the *Fédération des Associations Féminine du Sénégal*, farmers' associations, and professional and religious associations, including the *Soptimist Club*, *Association des Juristes Sénégalaises*, *Associations des Pharmaciennes* and the *Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFARD) in 1977<sup>1</sup>. AFARD could be considered the birthplace of the first feminist movement, *Yewwu Yewwi* (YY) – meaning “wake up and enlighten” in Wolof – as YY's founding members were affiliated to AFARD.

Created in 1984, YY was the first Senegalese association with a feminist orientation that challenged patriarchal social norms and institutions. The movement was led by highly educated and dedicated female intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> YY is seen as the first wave of feminism in Senegal, from 1980 to 1990. The second wave, from 1990 to 2000, was largely invisible, being less revolutionary, vocal and assertive than their predecessors. Later came the third wave, from 2000 onward, characterised by their quest for a new identity with an openly feminist ideology that embraces different realms of women's lives and ways of being.

This article will discuss the three waves

of Senegalese feminist evolution in historical perspective. We focus on the character of each by comparing the nature of their respective commitments and activism along with their obstacles and achievements.

## The First Wave of Feminism: The Radical

Although women had long been part of Senegal's movements for independence, the International Year of Women in 1975 and the Women's Decade that ended in 1985 focussed particular awareness on the situation of women in Senegal. During this period, different associations contributed to raising consciousness of women's conditions, questioning their individual and collective status and roles, and proposing solutions and alternatives. However, despite their merits, these associations did not present women's issues in a sustainable way that could facilitate positive changes in women's lives.

*Yewwu-Yewwi* emerged in 1984, openly proclaiming itself to be feminist.<sup>3</sup> YY identified patriarchy as an ideological system that validates and endorses the subordination of women and called for the radical change of Senegalese society. YY aimed to, firstly, develop a new feminist consciousness of resistance and struggle against all ideologies that oppress and neglect women, and secondly, to fight against all forms of domination over women in both private and public spheres. The movement addressed very complex issues, such as condemning polygamy, promoting women's control of their bodies through contraception and



**Dr Barrel Gueye** is passionate about the empowerment of youth, especially girls. She has many years of experience in teaching and research, mainly in equity and equality, social foundations of education, gender issues, project management and research appraisal. She has taught pedagogy, child and adolescent psychology, gender issues and qualitative research methods at Binghamton University, D'Youville College (Buffalo, NY) and East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. Dr Gueye's experience also includes important field research on gender and education in sub-Saharan Africa. She has coordinated the Forum of African Women Educationalists' research programme on gender and education in Africa, based in Nairobi. She is a co-founder of the Dakar Institute.

abortion, and promoting equal rights for men and women especially in politics, and equal pay. Such issues were almost taboo in the conservative Senegal of that time. While this influential movement did indeed make a great contribution to advance of the status of women in Senegal, its success, and the national and international momentum it created, was just temporary.

YY's elitist lack of inclusion and diversity impacted negatively on the stability of the movement and its sustainability. Despite its marked presence in the public arena, and its awareness activities, mobilisation, advocacy and publications, YY was unpopular and not well accepted in Senegal. Compared to the majority of Senegalese women, most of its high-profile founders were privileged intellectuals. The movement was also rejected

---

The first wave feminists were also hampered by the absence of a younger generation within their movement.

---

for its attacks on religious values such as polygamy and the role conferred on men as the head of the family, among others. This meant that YY could not mobilise beyond the circles of educated women on the left and contributed to the waning of the movement and then its dissolution. The first wave feminists were also hampered by the absence of a younger generation within their movement. The close-knit organisation did not think about its continuity nor capitalise on the youth. Although the movement was able to be heard and carried out large-scale activities, these enlightened women seemed more interested in remaining a small dedicated group with a mutual understanding than in opening to the larger community, including the youth.



**Dr Selly Bâ** is a human rights activist and holds a doctorate in sociology from Cheikh Anta Diop University. She is a specialist in gender issues related to religion, security and migration in Senegal and the author of several articles and collective publications. She is currently a programme officer at the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

## The Second Wave of Feminism: The Invisible

The second wave of feminism in Senegal, if there was one, is not easily captured as their fight was more at the individual level. That generation did not take over the YY movement, nor did they create one of their own. This could be due to the stigmatisation that the YY women endured for being considered irreligious, out of touch with social and

cultural realities and manipulated by European and American feminists. Besides, the second wave did not feel the need to be as aggressive and assertive as their elders who had already paved the way. They enjoyed and appreciated the achievements of the first wave, which had facilitated their access to education and achieved other victories related to gaining more rights for women. Consequently, the second wave was more subtle and restrained.

Another aspect of the second wave was the influence of pan-Africanism. They lived their feminism by looking beyond the Senegalese arena to include all African women and celebrating the cultural and political ethos that unites people of African descent. In continental and international fora, they carried on with issues addressed by their elders, such as opposition to female genital mutilation and child marriages.

## The Third Wave: The Inclusive

Adja Samyr Seck, a young Senegalese human rights activist, wonders why she and other women of her generation do not carry the torch of feminism: “[A]s a responsible and committed woman, a set of questions suddenly cross my mind. What is feminism really? Who is a feminist? What are their demands? Who are the pioneers of Senegalese feminism?”<sup>4</sup>.

This denotes the critical situation of the Third Wave of feminism in Senegal, which is in a slow mode. One can feel nostalgic for the strong feminism of the 1980s, even if there is an increase in individual engagement and consciousness, especially through social networks. These young feminists are in a better position to assert their feminism than the older generation but less interested in consolidating progress. They are concerned about their own situatedness and draw visible lines between Senegalese and Western feminisms. For them, there are as many feminism(s) as countries, and each feminism adapts to the needs and issues of its own society. To avoid the stigmatisation experienced by the first wave, they insist that Senegalese people need to be told that Senegalese feminists do not seek to copy the Western model. In the words of Adama Pouye, a young feminist scholar in Dakar: “It is up to us to contextualise each of the demands, that the feminist problems raised



are our own, in accordance with our society and expressed in a language that speaks to the Senegalese.”<sup>5</sup>

Like second-wave feminists, and in the absence of a strong movement like YY, they hold occasional gatherings to discuss current and urgent issues. These include demands for the criminalisation of rape and paedophilia, and a #metoo campaign that was contextualised and renamed #Balance-TonSaïSaï (“balance your bad attitude”).

Even if the fight against male supremacy remains common between the different generations, the third wave seems to be negotiating the weight of traditions and religion differently. Young Senegalese feminists seem to be more open to the inclusion of LGBTQ people, they do not see veiling as oppressive to women, and they accept and embrace polygamy, one of the issues the first wave fiercely raised and challenged throughout their tenure.

The decline in feminist radical dynamism over the past twenty years coincides with the emergence of a discourse centred on the concept of gender as a social construct and a feminist intersectional approach that highlights and includes differences that were often disregarded by the first and second waves.<sup>6</sup> These differences

include religion, race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, ability and body type. By acknowledging that “woman” is not a homogeneous category with a common life experience, this presents an alternative to the older radical Senegalese feminist movement informed by an essentialist ideology.

The youth wave seems to use a more practical strategy; they perform their agency/ies within the patriarchal status quo through compromise rather than provocation. They regret that earlier generations did not leave behind more writings that could inform them. They also yearn for

---

The fight against male supremacy remains common between the different generations, the third wave seems to be negotiating the weight of traditions and religion differently.

---

writing that is more relevant to and reflective of Senegalese and African realities than the Western feminism that guided the first wave. This new generation claims to be deeply engrained in what Ali Mazrui calls the “triple heritage” of African indigeneity,

*Intergenerational exchange on Senegalese feminism hosted by the HBF Dakar office, 5 November 2019.*

© VidéoPositive

European colonialism, and Islam.<sup>7</sup> However, although they seem to know their way forward and make good use of social media to achieve their goals, one can notice contradictions in this new discourse.

## Different Challenges

The three generations of Senegalese feminists faced different difficulties. As the first association to proclaim itself feminist, Yewwu Yewwi sparked sharp opposition. In a conservative country where traditions and customs are particularly persistent, the movement dared to challenge patriarchal supremacy with revolutionary discourse. Thus, it was the target of attacks by religious movements, conservatives, politicians, and other women.

The first wave experienced intimidation from men, and Islamists in particular, throughout their activism. Islamists associated them with the “henchmen of Satan” and fought to prevent them from “corrupting” Senegalese society.<sup>8</sup> Their questioning of polygamy put them in conflict in a country where religion plays a big part in people’s lives. Their advocacy for women to be responsible for their own bodies in the 1980s was seen as a call for “debauchery”.

---

Today’s generation is less stigmatised and marginalised than the older generation and has easier opportunities and interactions with women all over the world.

---

Once again, with their disturbing and utopian requests, they were ahead of Senegalese society at the time. Given this climate, detractors did not hesitate to resort to defamation just to discredit them in the eyes of the public. They were “ugly women” in “need of husbands”, “easy women” without good manners, libertines who would lead society to perdition.<sup>9</sup> Some women who were close to YY were also subjected to violence.

Today’s generation is less stigmatised and marginalised than the older generation and has easier opportunities and interactions with women all over the world. However, the challenges they encounter may be related to their lack of a strong movement like YY. The youth wave disapproves of Western influence, yet they are greatly

affected by changes from the West. Rather than putting their forces together to make larger changes and achieve bigger goals, their focus on individual fights weakens them, and social media has its own limits. These online networks could lead to self-centredness and a more individualistic approach to women’s rights and advocacy that seem more Western and less in keeping with the Senegalese realities they endorse. Their use of social media distances the young generation of feminists from the masses who cannot read or write or who do not have access to the internet. However, it is important to note their ability to challenge the mores and customs that continue to discriminate on the basis of gender.

## Different Achievements

These difficulties have impacted feminist actions in Senegal and limited the realisation of their goals. The first wave paved the way for all women’s movements and feminist causes. During the 1980s and 1990s, they raised awareness of women’s civil and political rights. They successfully lobbied for the improvement of the Family Code of 1973, highlighted violence against women, and advocated for the involvement of women in economic projects. Yewwu Yewwi also helped to improve Senegalese women’s lives by “waking up and enlightening” women and promoting girls’ education.

Through its many activities, YY offered a resolute orientation to many women’s movements, even today. It played a leading role in the fight for parity and against violence against women and genital mutilation, even if it was at the level of theory. Its influence can be measured by the development of associations to take up women’s claims. This first wave marked a key stage in raising the awareness of the role women can and must play at both political and professional levels. It also helped to bring Senegalese women’s issues to national and international attention.

The second wave took up opportunities created by their predecessors and continued the fight for a more inclusive and woman-sensitive society. Their work led to the law against female excision in 1999 and the ratification of the age of marriage at 18 years. Unfortunately, the Senegalese Family Code has, to this date, not changed the minimum age of marriage for girls, which is still 16 years with parental consent.<sup>10</sup> This



is inconsistent with international conventions that establish 18 as the minimum age for marriage and are also endorsed by Senegal. At the continental level, the clear focus on gender equity in the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) can be attributed to the second wave's activism.

As for the third wave, social media has facilitated their exposure to and communication with feminists all over the world. They write blogs and are active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. They participate in local and international campaigns for women's rights and well-being and try to contextualise relevant issues to Senegalese realities. Their achievements include mandatory schooling in 2004<sup>11</sup>, the parity law for men and women in 2010<sup>12</sup>, and the criminalisation of sexual abuse in 2019<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed different waves of feminism in Senegal, highlighting their respective discourses and comparatively analysing their difficulties and achievements. The first wave was more visible in national and international arenas and managed to gain momentum and some concrete achievements. However, it had limited success in getting recognition from women and the wider Senegalese society. Due to their radical discourse and their lack of sustain-

able planned activities, they did not survive.

The second wave, less traumatised by patriarchal hegemony, remained quite unnoticed despite its pan-Africanist approach and continuous battle with the set goals of the first wave. The youth wave claims to be fine with aspects of patriarchal ideology that the first wave – and the

---

They have not built more durable and relevant movements that could support bigger, better and more organised strategies.

---

second, to a lesser extent – fiercely rejected. They embrace polygamy and a non-binary approach to gender and do not consider veil-wearing to be oppressive. They seem on a quest for an identity that could accommodate both their conservative and feminist allegiances.

If the first wave was able to ease the way for the next generation of feminists, such was not the case for their successors. Even though the second and the third waves have each contributed positively to the status of women in Senegal, they have not built more durable and relevant movements that could support bigger, better and more organised strategies. This has weakened their potential to make greater concrete changes in the lives of Senegalese women. ■■■

1 Blandine Destremau and Christine Verschuur, "Féminismes décoloniaux, genre et développement: Entretien avec Fatou Sow," *Revue Tiers Monde* 1 (2012), 145–160, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2012-1-page-145.htm>.

2 F. Sow and M. Diouf (Eds), *La reconstruction du mouvement social féminin africain et la production d'une pensée politique liée à la lutte des femmes* (Dakar: Panafrica Silex/Nouvelles, 2007).

3 Hawa Kane, 2008, *L'émergence d'un mouvement féministe au Sénégal: le cas de Yewwu Yewwi* PLF (2008, Master's thesis, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, Sénégal).

4 Own translation. Adja Samyr Seck, "Moi, Féministe!" in *La pensée et l'avenir du mouvement féministe au Sénégal*, edited by Fatou Faye and Marie N'guettia (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2000), <http://rosalux.sn/la-pensee-et-l-avenir-du-mouvement-feministe-au-senegal>, 73.

5 Own translation. Rama Salla Dieng, "Féminisme, religion et culture au Sénégal", *Senepus Femmes*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.senepus.com/femmes/feminisme-religion-et-culture-au-senegal>.

6 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (3rd ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2014).

7 A. A. Mazrui, *The Africans* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1986)

8 Sow and Diouf, *La reconstruction du mouvement*.

9 Destremau and Verschuur, "Féminismes décoloniaux".

10 OECD Development, "Gender Index: Senegal," accessed 5 December 2020, <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/SN.pdf>.

11 Loi 2004-37 du 15 Décembre 2004 modifiant et complétant la loi d'orientation de l'éducation nationale n° 91-22 du 16 Février 1991.

12 Loi n° 2010-11 du 28 mai 2010 instituant la parité absolue Homme-Femme.

13 Loi n° 2020-05 du 10 janvier 2020 modifie la loi n° 65-60 du 21 juillet 1965 portant code pénal relatif à la criminalisation du viol et de la pédophilie.

# Tracing the Development of Feminist Ideas Through Four Senegalese Women Writers' Novels:

## Toward an Intergenerational Dialogue

Dr Fatoumata Keita

### Mariama Bâ and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness in Senegalese Literature

Choosing Mariama Bâ (1929–1981) as an entry point into the discussion of intergenerational feminism in Senegal is neither fortuitous nor coincidental. She not only “distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in her choice of genre” (a letter novel, which is not common)<sup>1</sup>, she sets the tone for the feminist debate by problematising “the treatment of women in Africa”<sup>2</sup> with much poise and depth. No wonder that the groundbreaking work of Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Grave *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, was both prompted by and dedicated to Bâ’s “commitment and African feminism”<sup>3</sup>.

Hence, any study of intergenerational feminism in Senegal should start with Bâ’s award-winning 1979 novel, *Une si longue lettre* (translated as *So Long a Letter* in 1989)<sup>4</sup>: “the first feminist novel in Senegal”<sup>5</sup> and “the classical feminist statement by a sub-Saharan African woman”<sup>6</sup>. In 1980, it won the inaugural Noma Award for Publishing in Africa<sup>7</sup> for its “testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth”<sup>8</sup>. Although *Une si longue lettre* was not the first novel written by a Senegalese woman<sup>9</sup>, it provides the measure by which Senegalese women’s literature has been evaluated and judged. This pivotal novel foregrounds women’s experiences of multiple forms of oppression while giving rise to a genuine feminist voice in Senegalese women’s narratives. Moreover, probing sensitive issues like “polygyny, Islam, and urban

lifestyles in contemporary Senegal”, it “adds one more female voice to the all too male-centred corpus of historical and anthropological texts in Africa”<sup>10</sup>. The novel also provides “a unique and intimate portrait of rapid social transformation” undergone by women in postcolonial Senegalese society.<sup>11</sup>

If feminism is “a political movement for the emancipation of women”<sup>12</sup>, this novel’s engagement with women’s subservient position, oppression and marginalisation in patriarchal Senegalese societies makes it feminist. The plot revolves around the reminiscences of the main character Ramatoulaye during her widowhood, and she writes a letter to Aissatou, her childhood friend. These characters were “the first pioneers of the promotion of African women”<sup>13</sup>, whose ideals were incompatible with the social norms of a community where a married woman “gives up her personality, her dignity” to become “a thing in the service of the man who has married her”<sup>14</sup>. It is a woman-centred narrative that makes space for women to voice their sufferings and yearnings and to devise alternatives and avenues for escape and empowerment. Bâ’s letter form allows an intimate disclosure of what it means to be a woman, a wife and a mother in a Senegalese society where Islam intersects with gender and culture and conspires in some way or another to undermine women’s assertiveness and emancipation.

If feminist mobilisation in Senegal culminated in the 1970s–80s, when Yewwu-Yewwi, under the leadership of Marie-Angelique Savané, provided a platform for women to challenge ingrained patriarchal ideologies<sup>15</sup>, then it was Mariama Bâ’s novel that paved the way for the younger generation to engage in femi-



**Dr Fatoumata Keita** is an assistant professor of English at the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, in Bamako, Mali. Her teaching and research focus is Africana women’s social and political activism as reflected in their autobiographical and fictional writings. Her recent research explores tropes of struggle, survival and empowerment in Africana women Nobel laureates’ writings. Her research interests also encompass gender and post-colonial studies, Afrocentricity, African and African American literature, and peace- and security-building in Africa. She earned a doctorate in American literature from L’Université Gaston Berger, in Saint-Louis, Senegal, in 2014. She was a 2017–2018 Fulbright research scholar at the Columbia University Institute of African Studies in New York.



nist debates on gender inequality and women's inferior status with boldness and more confidence.<sup>16</sup> Subverting long-held myths and stereotypes about the African woman's victimisation and disempowerment, its self-reflexive structure and diary format "engages in dialogic contestation" with its predecessors, while creating "an open-endedness that encourages further innovation"<sup>17</sup> in the struggle for women's emancipation and well-being. Ramatoulaye's last words, "I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. The word 'happiness' does indeed have a meaning"<sup>18</sup>, prefigures the "happy feminist" proposed by the Nigerian novelist and short-story writer Chimamanda Adichie, and adopted by Ndèye Fatou Kane, the new Senegalese woman author who – unlike Bâ – publicly embraces the feminist label.<sup>19</sup> Forty years after its publication, *So Long a Letter* continues to attract feminist critical attention as the issues it addresses, such as girls' education, polygamy, gender-based violence and women subjugating women<sup>20</sup>, are still fraught with tension in African women's narratives.

## Threads of Continuity Through Senegalese Women's Writing

Any discussion of intergenerational feminism in Senegal should also pay attention to the history of feminism because "[m]ale violence must be theorised and interpreted within particular societies, in order to both understand it better and to effectively organise to change it"<sup>21</sup>. The emergence of feminism in Africa, and in Senegal, was marked by stereotypical representations of African women as hapless and passive victims of patriarchy<sup>22</sup>, an introduction that made feminism unpopular and problematic.<sup>23</sup> Many African women were wary to embrace it, regarding it as a foreign and

*Woman reading Une si longue lettre, Mariama Bâ's award-winning 1979 feminist novel. Photo courtesy of Tenin Samake.*

---

The emergence of feminism in Africa, and in Senegal, was marked by stereotypical representations of African women as hapless and passive victims of patriarchy

---

imported ideology.<sup>24</sup> African feminism, however, takes into account the unique “social and historical realities of African women’s lives”<sup>25</sup>, delineates the causes of their oppression, and proffers strategies for their liberation<sup>26</sup>. The African American theorist Clenora Hudson-Weems coined “Africana womanism” for women of African descent to highlight “the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women”<sup>27</sup>. This view differs from Western feminism by not considering men as enemies but as counterparts in the fight against racism.<sup>28</sup> Bâ’s fiction exhibits a strong wom-

---

Ken Bugul takes the African feminist struggle to another level by departing from the radical feminism of her time and eschewing its epistemological dilemma toward polygamy.

---

anist consciousness that also prompts her to celebrate the heteronormative family structure and motherhood. She paves the way for Ken Bugul, Fatou Diome and Ndèye Fatou Kane to “throw their own voices”<sup>29</sup> and perpetuate her legacy.

Ken Bugul’s narratives show threads of ideological connection with Bâ’s writings regarding polygamy, women’s position in Islam, and mixed marriage. Born in 1948 as Mariétou Mbaye, her autobiographical 1982 novel, *Le Baobab Fou*<sup>30</sup> (translated as *Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*, 1991) was considered too daring for a Senegalese Muslim woman and she was advised to take a pseudonym.<sup>31</sup> She began to write as Ken Bugul, “the one who is unwanted”. *Cendres et braises* (1994)<sup>32</sup> and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999)<sup>33</sup> complete the trilogy that traces her life from a Senegalese village to Belgium and her return, when she becomes the twenty-eighth wife of a marabout. While feminists in the West celebrated her path-breaking work, they were shocked to learn of her polygamous status.<sup>34</sup>

Ken Bugul takes the African feminist struggle to another level by departing from the radical feminism of her time and eschewing its epistemological dilemma toward polygamy. She also draws from her own experiences of discrimination as a Senegalese immigrant in Belgium. Rejected and disoriented, she indulges in drinking and prostitution. Her “feminist autobiogra-

phies”<sup>35</sup> may be the most rebellious literary works ever written by a Senegalese woman.

Ken Bugul’s intimate and unflinching gaze on gender, migration, interracial and forbidden love is taken up by Fatou Diome’s 2003 *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (translated as *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006)) and Ndèye Fatou Kane’s *Le Malheur de vivre* (2018). These two authors belong to the third and fourth generations of Senegalese writers, taking their place among the children of the post-colony<sup>36</sup> in France as well. The French literary critic Odile Cazenave describes this generation of francophone African writers in Paris as probing the lives of African immigrants in France and negotiating identity and belonging in their work.<sup>37</sup> Like Chimamanda Adichie, whose *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) and *Americanah* (2013) also zero in on displacement and its underlying emotional and psychological trauma, both Diome and Kane fit into Cazenave’s category of “rebellious women”<sup>38</sup>. Their fiction casts an uncompromising gaze on racism, discrimination, gender-based violence and sexuality.

These writers also look to their literary foremothers, continuing the womanist struggle that draws its sustenance from a mother-to-daughter generational dialogue. Born in 1986, Ndèye Fatou Kane is a newcomer to the Senegalese literary scene. Her first novel, *Le malheur de vivre*<sup>39</sup>, deals with migration and love that ends tragically. Unlike Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, the first Senegalese woman to publish a novel, Kane embraces her feminism with more confidence and boldness. Kane says that Mariama Bâ has deeply influenced and shaped her literary career, along with Awa Thiam, another torchbearer of the feminist movement in Senegal.<sup>40</sup> In Kane’s novel, the mother of the main character, Sakina, bears the name of Mariama Bâ, and *So Long a Letter* can be seen as a “progenitor” of her short story “Incertitude”, which is based on female friendship and empowerment.<sup>41</sup> Kane also expresses her indebtedness to Simone de Beauvoir and Chimamanda Adichie for sharpening her feminist consciousness and knowledge.

Fatou Diome also follows in the steps of Bâ and Ken Bugul. Born in 1968, she migrated to France in the 1990s. Her first novel, *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*, like *Le Baobab Fou*, is inspired by her experience as an immigrant African woman in France and dramatizes “home” as “a place of alien-

ation and displacement."<sup>42</sup> In her second novel, *Kétala* (2006), homosexuality and the queer subject contest heteronormative social representations.<sup>43</sup> The father of *Kétala* is unable to comprehend his son's homosexuality and sends him to the army, hoping to 'save his manhood'.<sup>44</sup> Extending the space provided by the first and the second generation of Senegalese women writers, the work of Diome and Kane take issue with gender stereotypes and with women's ambivalence towards confronting social norms that hinder their emancipation and empowerment.

A close reading of these four women's texts reveals a certain continuity and dialogue across generations that enriches the feminist debate in Senegal while also addressing global feminist concerns. Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Fatou Diome and Ndèye Fatou Kane find their rightful place in womanist and intersectional feminist theories that take into account the overlapping forms of oppression that women face. Their narratives are not bound only by their being Senegalese, but also by their illumination of "transitional stages of human development in societies constantly evolving"<sup>45</sup>. They and their female protagonists "yearn for a society in which they can assert their

---

A close reading of these four women's texts reveals a certain continuity and dialogue across generations that enriches the feminist debate in Senegal while also addressing global feminist concerns.

---

innate resourcefulness by rejecting the fetters of tradition and any aspects of socialisation that puts them at a disadvantage"<sup>46</sup>. Bâ has largely helped to "destroy the emptiness of silence" that "represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy"<sup>47</sup>. She paved the way for Ken Bugul, Diome and Kane to write African women into history.<sup>48</sup> Their narratives encourage dialogue on social issues like gender and racial violence that need be challenged for the social, economic and political empowerment of Senegalese women. Resonating across generations and continents, their storytelling becomes a way to share experiences and strategies, to reinforce women's resilience and fortitude, to confront all forms of oppression and domination, and to explore global issues that are relevant to Senegalese women's lives. ■■■

- 1 Ann McElaney-Johnson, "Epistolary Friendship: 'La prise de parole' in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*," *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 110–121, 111.
- 2 Gibreel M. Kamara, "The Feminist Struggle in the Senegalese Novel: Mariama Ba and Sembene Ousmane," *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 2 (2001): 212–228, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180961>, 214.
- 3 Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (eds), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986).
- 4 Mariama Bâ, *Une Si Longue Lettre* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979); *So Long a Letter*, trans. by Modupé Bodé-Thomas (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989).
- 5 Laurie Edson, "Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family" *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 17, no. 1 (1993): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1309>, 1.
- 6 Marame Gueye, "Stuck on *So Long a Letter*: Senegalese Women's Writings and the Specter of Mariama Bâ" (Paper presented at the 20th Anniversary Summit of the African Educational Research Network, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 19 May 2012), [http://www.academia.edu/download/38128450/AERN2012Summit\\_Gueye.pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/38128450/AERN2012Summit_Gueye.pdf).
- 7 The Noma award (1979–2009) was established by Shoichi Noma, the president of Kodansha Ltd, the largest publishing house in Japan, to encourage the publication of works by African writers.
- 8 Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2020), 133.
- 9 Nafissatou Niang Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975) was the first published autobiographical work by a Senegalese woman, followed by Aminata Sow Fall's novel *Revenant* in 1976.
- 10 James Pritchett, "Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," in *African Novels in the Classroom*, ed. Margaret Jean Hay (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 49–62, 50.
- 11 Pritchett, "Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," 49.
- 12 Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997), 17.
- 13 Kolawole, *Womanism*, 14–15.
- 14 Kolawole, *Womanism*, 4.
- 15 Oumar Kane and Hawa Kane, "The Origins of the Feminist Movement in Senegal: A Social History of the Pioneering Yewwu-Yewwi," *African Sociological Review* 22 no. 1 (2018): 19–30, 21.
- 16 Shirin Edwin, "Expressing Islamic Feminism in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 16, no. 6 (2009), 723–740, <https://doi.org/10.1080/096636909032279161>.
- 17 McElaney-Johnson, "Epistolary Friendship," 112.
- 18 Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, 89.
- 19 Viviane Forson, "Ndèye Fatou Kane: l'Afrique a compté des féministes avant l'heure", *Le Point Afrique*, published 10 September 2018, modified 8 March 2019, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/societe-ndeye-fatou-kane-l-afrique-a-compte-des-feministes-avant-l-heure-10-09-2018-2249988\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/societe-ndeye-fatou-kane-l-afrique-a-compte-des-feministes-avant-l-heure-10-09-2018-2249988_3826.php).
- 20 Sylvester Mutunda, "Women Subjugating Women: Re-reading Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 33, no. 2–3 (2007): 90–125.
- 21 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* Mohanty, edited by Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991): 51–80, 58.
- 22 Kolawole, *Womanism*, 3.
- 23 Adele King, "The Personal and the Political in the Work of Mariama Bâ," *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 18, no. 2, (1994): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1348>, 2.
- 24 Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, quoted in Kolawole, *Womanism*, 9.
- 25 Carole Boyce Davies, "Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," in Davies and Graves, *Ngambika*, 1–23, 6.
- 26 Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989), 1.
- 27 Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism* (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, 1993), 22.
- 28 Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism*, 28.
- 29 Kolawole, *Womanism*, 6. To "throw one's voice comes from the Wolof expression "Saani baat".
- 30 Ken Bugul, *Le Baobab fou* (Dakar: NEA, 1983).
- 31 Ken Bugul, Carine Bourget and Irène Assiba d'Almeida, "Entretien avec Ken Bugul," *The French Review* 77, no. 2 (2003): 352–363, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3132781>, 352.
- 32 Ken Bugul, *Cendres et braises* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).
- 33 Ken Bugul, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1999).
- 34 Ken Bugul, Bourget and d'Almeida, "Entretien", 352.
- 35 Amadou Falilou Ndiay and Moussa Sagna, "Le Baobab fou, Riwan ou le chemin de sable et De l'autre côté du regard: Les Autobiographies féministes de Ken Bugul," *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, 32, no. 1 (2017), 57–69, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nef.2017.0005>.
- 36 Abourahman Waberi, "Les enfants de la postcolonie: Esquisse d'une nouvelle génération d'écrivains francophones d'Afrique noire," *Notre Librairie* 135 (1998), 8–15.
- 37 Odile Cazenave, *Une nouvelle génération de romanciers africains à Paris* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 297.
- 38 Odile Cazenave, *Femmes rebelles: Naissance d'un nouveau roman africain au féminin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).
- 39 Ndèye Fatou Kane, *Le Malheur de vivre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014).
- 40 Ndèye Fatou Kane, *Vous avez dit féministe? Suivi de (In)certitudes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018).
- 41 Susan Z. Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminism, 1958–1988* (Durham NC/London: Duke University Press, 2011), 72.
- 42 Carole Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subjects* (London: Routledge, 1994), 21.
- 43 Aminata Cécile Mbaye, "Performing Gender Identities in Fatou Diome's Novel *Kétala*," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des études africaines* 53, no. 2 (2019): 235–250, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1634604>.
- 44 Fatou Diome, *Kétala* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 99.
- 45 Dele Layiwola, "Women and the Colonial Struggle in Three West African Novels," in *Understanding Post-Colonial Identities: Africa, Ireland and the Pacific*, edited by Dele Layiwola (Ibadan: Sefer, 2001): 122–140, 126.
- 46 Layiwola, "Women and the Colonial Struggle," 130.
- 47 Irène Assiba d'Almeida, *Francophone African Women: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville FL: University of Florida Press, 1994), 1.
- 48 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," in *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 245–264, 245.

# Intergenerational Feminist Organising and Solidarity in South Africa:

Mase Ramaru and Elsbeth Engelbrecht

## Conversation

The questions of old-vs-new approaches to feminist organising, critiques of the efforts of previous generations of feminists, and the impact of imperialist notions of competition and hierarchy on multigenerational feminist solidarity have all plagued multigenerational feminist spaces. Mase Ramaru is in conversation with Elsbeth Engelbrecht about the complexities of intergenerational feminist relations and the options for feminism of thinking through intergenerational solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

**Mase Ramaru:** Maybe we can start around this idea of eldership. I want to unpack it and the ways it manifests in intergenerational spaces because *die grootmense wil altyd die grootmense wees* [the grown-ups always want to wield their age]. It often feels like more established feminists need their experience and years to be central to intergenerational interactions and not be contested.

**Elsbeth Engelbrecht:** Do you think it is ageism? Or is it a kind of need for affirmation? I don't know. It's a combination of many things.

**MR:** I think people struggle to negotiate their roles as established feminists who have navigated their way through great struggle and have been part of key political moments. The challenge is how that intersects with building intergenerational relationships rooted in co-learning. I have found at times that some established feminists enter into spaces as an "all-knowing" voice, who feel like their wisdom and "authority" should not be challenged, or they understand the suggestion of new ideas and new strategies as a direct challenge to their voice and experiences. I struggle sometimes with the idea of holding the work of generations of feminists before me and their amazing contributions alongside this feeling that, for this embracing and holding to happen, I must buy into the deeply toxic and patriarchal notions of eldership and knowledge hierarchies.

**EE:** I think that it is partly their own experiences. They – older feminists – had to go through the same *kak* [shit] that the current generation of feminists are dealing with, and some are dealing with it still, even now. Maybe I can't say that things were much harder, but maybe just different. Saying that it's harder immediately creates a hierarchy around struggle, which I think is part of the problem. I think our experiences are just different and that includes trying to find the space for yourself in the collective. But I do not know if ours is a bit more punitive than the previous generations. It does feel that way.



**Mase Ramaru** is a feminist organiser based in Cape Town, South Africa. A former junior research fellow at the African Gender Institute, she has also worked closely with the Young Women's Leadership Project, a regional project on sexual and reproductive health rights that operates in six universities in southern Africa. Mase is also the co-founder and convener of the Queer Feminist Film Festival (#QFFF), a film festival that celebrates and educates on grassroots queer feminist activism by folk in peri-urban and rural areas, whose transformative work is not always recognised. Through the use of film, the Festival engages communities on queer issues, promotes queer visibility and facilitates conversations around community-building. Having completed her honours degree in Gender and Transformation at the University of Cape Town in 2016, Mase is currently a master's student in gender studies at UCT.

**MR:** What do you mean, it feels a little more punitive?

**EE:** At the time when my generation started to organise, it felt like the enemy was clearly defined. Historically, in a South African context, the enemy was apartheid, and it was in some sense very easy, much more straightforward to narrow down. Well, that's how it felt.

While there were conversations happening around women's rights and gender justice, I think it was experienced as hierarchical, a kind of "Olympics of oppression"<sup>2</sup>. In all of this, there was still the central idea that the real enemy is apartheid and the apartheid state, and therefore racism or racist capitalist ideologies.

I think, in some ways, there was a way in which we, I'm assuming, came together in ways that were less punitive because the enemy was much stronger and much clearer. But saying this also assumes that there was no competitiveness or clear contradictions, exclusions, in-groups and out-groups, because I think that was there. You would not have had icons if there wasn't some sense of "who can feminist the best", who's the best one! Anyway, the point is I think multigenerational spaces have become more punitive because, all of a sudden, the "enemy" is more complex and contested at times. The "enemy" has become us or maybe we have become much more inward-looking, far less willing to compromise.

**MR:** I hear you. This makes me think of a conversation with a fellow feminist when she said something which I thought was quite impactful. She mentioned that how she understands and rationalises some of the contentions within feminist spaces is from the position feminists find themselves in society: because we always have to fight systems and society, we often fail to recognise feminist spaces as a space of difference. We end up bringing the fight to each other.

The questions that follow for me are around the contentions that exist within intergenerational feminist spaces. Can we name them and explore the reasons why we find it difficult to resolve these contentions? How do we understand the roots of these contentions? What are the grey areas and nuances we are constantly ignoring? Can we also explore ways to hold space for each other as we try to reach resolution?

**EE:** I'm just wondering, maybe we need to go back a little and understand who are "the feminists" we are talking about, right? Who are the feminists we are centring?

For most of us, when we reflect on the people who have helped us to question our place in the world and resistance to power, it is often our immediate families. It always feels to me that when we reflect on our feminist organising, our feminist practice, they are often not the examples we make when speaking about the influences we connect to and learn from. We do not speak of the group of women in our local community who would see that somebody does not have food and then organise among each other and give support to them. It always feels as if, when we talk about feminists and reference instances of feminist activism, we inevitably talk about that either in civil-society or in academic spaces, and we are not intersectional. We have internalised our own hierarchies in which certain feminists have more value.

So, the question for me is also how and where do we look for affirmation and learning? If I look at all my scars, I often speak of the scars I picked up in an NGO sector. I rarely speak about the scars that I experience through my familial life, for example, and I keep that somehow separate from that lived experience. I feel like there is that kind of contradiction in the ways that we are more critical in how we look at differ-



**Elsbeth Engelbrecht** has been active in NGOs and gender justice movements in South Africa for more than 30 years. This includes 17 years in the land and agrarian-reform justice sector and, prior to that, with programmes promoting access to equal education and resources for resource-poor rural black youths. She joined Triangle Project in 2007 when they began working with rural lesbian and bisexual women in the Western Cape and later managed their Community Engagement and Empowerment Programme. She was Key Populations Programme Manager in the Free State and Northern Cape for the global public-health organisation ICAP (University of Columbia). She returned to Triangle Project in 2016 as Research and Advocacy Manager and currently serves as the organisation's director.





*Intergenerational anti-GBV protest in South Africa. Photo courtesy of Sonke Gender Justice.*

ent forms of feminist organising spaces for support and solidarity than how we view other relationships that we need to interrogate more.

As you were talking, I was thinking about what the continuum of eldership is. What would we speak of as a good experience of eldership? Because, like any other learning space or nurturing space, it will have both its contradictions but also its moments and places of support and affirmation. What are the patterns that we need to look for? Often the good stuff is the unspoken ways in which people care for you, right? This often happens outside of the meeting spaces where power plays itself out and where spaces are dictated by a hierarchy of knowledge and “formalised knowledge” leads the discussion.

But what I want to know is, what is the distinction that we make in feminist spaces around positive eldership? How do we recognise when so-called “older feminists” have a positive impact on us and our politics? Or even when that nurturing comes from the opposite end of the spectrum, from younger feminists? Even for myself, I would always gravitate towards certain people and learn from them. But there was always a sense that there was no space to openly claim certain feminists as good examples of eldership, and of feminism you wish to model. But I’m wondering why the practice was always just an unspoken one, why we could not affirm good examples of eldership when we saw them, and why we could also not show each other vulnerability.

**MR:** I agree, and maybe part of the reason why the deadlock exists is that part of the challenge of vulnerability is acknowledging that there’s a lot of learning that can happen both sides – without creating these hierarchies of learning and knowledge-sharing.

I do think a great error for us all, across generational lines, is the way we understand the concept of eldership, which we have come to define according to age and generation. Defining feminist elderhood according to age is not necessarily incorrect but I think it is limiting. At an intergenerational feminist convening some time ago, a fellow feminist raised questions around the limitation of understanding the concept of an old-vs-young feminist and how alienating it is to other feminists who do not sit comfortably in those moulds. For example, where do we put feminists who might be older but are just starting their journey with feminism? Do we neglect the fact that, in this



*A woman advocates intersectional feminism at a protest in South Africa.*

© Nicky Newman

instance, a so-called “younger feminist”, who is younger by age but quite advanced in the articulation of their feminist politics and their activism sits at the complete opposite of what this young/old spectrum we are using offers us?

So, a language that I adopted for myself when speaking of inter-generational feminism is to speak of the “emerging” and the “established” feminist. This minimises the obsession with age and this idea of the young and old. This language also allows me to think of learning within feminist spaces as a horizontal act, where knowledge has no hierarchy and is something that can be offered by anyone, at different stages of their journey. This is instead of a vertical idea of knowledge that is limited by age and knowledge rooted in particular contexts and time. This is not to erase the experience that generations of feminists

before me bring or to disregard them as important knowledge-holders. Rather, it is to recognise that all of this can happen in conversation with experiences and knowledge that are more recent and are informed by current political dynamics.

The ways we diminish space for feminists who are still trying to understand their own feminist practices and politics is part of the marginality of our feminist practices. We do not

make enough space for error and learning, especially for feminists who are finding their politics, thinking through how to articulate their politics, and for those who are stumbling their way through. I think this is a multigenerational error. An error that has great implications for feminist solidarity.

---

*I do think a great error for us all, across generational lines, is the way we understand the concept of eldership, which we have come to define according to age and generation.*

---

EE: So, I wanted to say something about articulation and agency.

For me, the question around an emerging and an established feminist is something that we should probably question because it has such loaded meaning – and the baggage is heavy especially if you are talking about it in the context of race and class. I am just thinking how, especially in the case of Black feminists and in South Africa, we are constantly “emerging” but never recognised as “established”.

Something that I often think about is the assumption that the articulation of clear feminist ideas only happens in the formal organised space. There is a different kind of articulation or a politics when you have a clear sense of the world and that patriarchy in itself is deeply problematic and white capitalist patriarchy even more so. For me, often articulation, more than other experiences or contributions in organising, is the hierarchy on which feminism is built. I would say that your ability to speak your feminism – the better you are able to articulate your understanding of the context, of how power works and how it should or could be fought – the stronger your place in feminist organising. As opposed to the farmworker and the “auntie” in the farming community who does not necessarily have the words, who doesn’t have the language of feminism, but her feminism is deeply rooted in action. When we start placing who we are into our feminism, I think that we need to be what you call “non-linear” – where we don’t engage with feminism in hierarchic ways and rather be as cyclical as possible, where we recognise feminism as a circle of knowledge that is accessible to all.

I don’t think there’s enough pushing against that, and I think part of it is because feminism has become so monetised and so burdened by value and place. If you cannot speak truth to power in a certain way, your value is less. You are dependent on the feminist who can “speak feminism” to translate for you, to re-interpret your politics. *As jy nie een van die mense is nie wat kan praat nie, fok jou.* [If you are not this person that can speak, then fuck off.] Personally, that’s something I really, really struggled with.

My first experience of the NGO world and, I guess, formalised, organised struggle work, was through the land justice struggle. I am rural. I want to use a local organisation I have worked with as my example. They came to write up the stories of land dispossession in Namaqualand. So, there was this push to document the stories of historical land ownership in Namaqualand and the struggles of land dispossession in the same way that they would document forced removals in the city. This was groundbreaking work.

I was, of course, on the outside looking in. Of course, the women who went into those spaces were white women and they were working with black men. To see this difference, this respect in the way these men were talking to these women, looking up to these women in ways that they were not doing to the black women around them, that was something else. This often meant that if the aunties had stories that they wanted to share, they couldn’t because [the men] would never be told to go make the tea or coffee, right? The aunties were in the kitchen. These women would then have to speak through these men and narrate the stories they wanted to share through them. The white women never ever would move to the kitchen, right? Well, I did not see

---

The ways we diminish space for feminists who are still trying to understand their own feminist practices and politics is part of the marginality of our feminist practices.

---

that. If the kitchen was where women were organising why did they not go there to hear their stories? They always prioritised the men and always made an effort to meet them where they congregated.

That instance was the first time that I really had a deep understanding of what it means to be a white woman and the kind of power that white women have, to be listened to with respect, and that the men will act on what they say. There was a deference there that was sobering. I moved into this context of understanding that they hold knowledge, they get to interpret the stories of these men, and that is where the power lies.

When I came into this work, I was inevitably the fieldworker. I tried to also begin to write but there was no way of pulling into the spaces where the writers were, because it was a space that was held by white women. When that began to shift for me was when I began to meet black women in academia who were writing, but in some ways doing exactly the same. They did not really make space, pro-actively, for new voices. If I wanted to be part of it, I was always asked, “But why don’t you study further?” As if learning did not happen in the field or in communities, as if I would be somehow better if I had that formalised training, knowledge, theory in my pocket, that it would somehow deepen my feminism more.

So, that is my question around knowledge creation and articulation: why is that some “feminist practices” are more important than others? Now that I think of it, it feels somehow that the language that was used in my generation was in some ways far more accessible than this new generation. I am talking about black feminists.

**MR:** I think we have said a mouthful, and it feels like we have only scratched the surface of the complexities and nuances that inform intergenerational solidarity. What is quite clear is the need for continued engagement. Thank you so much for taking time to reflect with me, Elsbeth. Hopefully we can think through ways to continue these engagements and get closer to the intergenerational feminist support spaces we all can grow from. ■■■

1 The conversation was written up by Mase Ramaru.

2 “Olympics of oppression” is used to describe instances when individuals or groups compete to prove that they are more oppressed than another group or that their experience of oppression outweighs another.

# Are Different Generations of Nigerian Feminists Ready to Join Forces?

Nkoyo Toyo and OluTimehin Adegbeye

## Interview

With the transition from military rule to democracy in 1999, Nigerian women hoped that their voices would finally be heard and their demands for an equal share in political participation fulfilled. Yet today's generation of young women and feminists are confronted with challenges similar to their older sisters. Two decades later, violence against women is as rampant as ever and, in the 2019 elections, only 62 women were elected to serve in the federal and state assemblies.

Nkoyo Toyo is a Nigerian politician, lawyer and advocate for development, with a focus on human rights and gender equality. She is a former Nigerian ambassador to Ethiopia and the founder of Gender and Development Action in Nigeria. OluTimehin Adegbeye is a Nigerian queer feminist advocate who works at the intersection of human rights, inclusion and social justice. Monika Umunna, programme coordinator at Heinrich Böll Foundation's Abuja office, spoke to them to explore Nigerian feminism and gender rights activism then and now, and how the different generations assess each other's struggles and achievements.

What influences have shaped your understanding of feminism in Nigeria and of you as a feminist?

**Nkoyo Toyo:** I am a child of the civil war fought between the Nigerian government and the secessionist state of Biafra. Having witnessed the atrocities of the war at the age of six years, I kept on raising, throughout my life, the questions on why the Biafran War happened, and why voiceless people remain voiceless. During my student years at Ahmadu Bello University in Kano, Marxist and socialist ideas raised huge questions that we all wrestled with. Led by human rights activist Ayesha Imam, we started to disaggregate the dominant narrative about the subjugation of people and the class struggle in order to find space for the role of women in society in this debate. So, I am a product of that time and environment, which helped me to discern and understand the exclusion of people and issues of marginalisation, discrimination and inequality.

Another defining moment for me and for the Nigerian women's movement was the transition to democracy in 1999. At the time, we had already developed a political agenda for Nigerian women and worked towards domesticating the Beijing Agenda<sup>1</sup>. We were part of the struggles for a return to democratic rule but unfortunately our voices, like many other voices from civil society, were ignored during the transition period. The male-dominated political mainstream reinforced their patriarchal narrative, which had defined the post-



**Nkoyo Toyo** is a lawyer and was an active member of Women in Nigeria (WIN) in the 1980s and '90s. In 1994, she became the executive director of Gender and Development Action (GADA), addressing women's rights abuses and exclusions. She was appointed as Nigeria's ambassador to Ethiopia and the African Union in 2003 and was elected to the Nigerian House of Assembly from 2011 to 2015. She is now on the board of several national and international development organisations.

independence character of Nigeria and unsurprisingly took over the transition process and used the Constitution to uphold their values and privileges.

As feminists and rights advocates asking for considerable transformation of the governance system, we found ourselves left out of the conversation and decision-making at this defining moment. Although, over the years, women achieved some success by domesticating international women's rights treaties<sup>2</sup>, the main challenge remained to grow our numbers and carry our issues into mainstream politics. That's why I decided to get into politics in 2003 and be part of changing the narrative from within.

---

My interest is in the intersections between more obvious feminist struggles and other, less obvious social issues. How can the fight against patriarchy include class, sexuality and access to housing, knowing that the source of the problem is the sexism, misogyny and patriarchal indoctrination of our society?

---

**OluTimehin Adegbeye:** I define myself as a queer feminist writer, public speaker and community builder, and work through the use of social media, targeting young women and queer people. My interest is in the intersections between more obvious feminist struggles and other, less obvious social issues. How can the fight against patriarchy include class, sexuality and access to housing, knowing that the source of the problem is the sexism, misogyny and patriarchal indoctrination of our society?

For me and many other feminists of my generation, the political system in Nigeria is not at the forefront of our minds. We grew up at a time when the work of crippling the public political education was already complete. By the time I was getting my education, history had been taken out of our curriculum, so I only learned about the Biafran War and the transition outside of school. Today, we are thinking more about the violence we have to navigate on a daily basis. We do not necessarily understand that today's power dynamics are the result of the conservative power dynamics that were institutionalised in 1999. We do not necessarily make the connection between Nigeria's militarised history and the dysfunctional relationship to power we experience in Nigeria today, where there is so much impunity in committing acts of violence. We do not necessarily trace back the intimate violence women experience today to the root causes that created this cultural impunity, which is the civil war that laid the foundation for violence and impunity. Feminists of my generation are now confronted with the question of why violence rules our daily lives.

How would you assess the state of Nigeria's feminist movement in your time?



**OluTimehin Adegbeye** is a Nigerian queer feminist advocate who works on human rights, inclusion and social justice in the areas of gender, sexualities and urbanisation. Her TED Talk on urban justice, "Who Belongs in a City?", was picked as a Top-10 TED Talk of 2017. She was awarded the 2019 Gerald Kraak Prize for her essay on sexual violence and secondary victimisation, "Mothers and Men". To learn more about her work, visit [ohtimehin.com](http://ohtimehin.com).

**NT:** When I got involved with Women in Nigeria (WIN), which was founded in 1982 at Ahmadu Bello University and was the most vocal and organised feminist movement at that time, it had space for different kinds of ideological views.

For example, at first, we were very quick in condemning women like Mrs Babangida – the wife of General [Ibrahim Badamasi] Babangida, Nigeria's head of state from 1985 to 1993 – for using her position to galvanise people through her Better Life for Rural Women Programme.<sup>3</sup> Over time, we came to realise that it was a great platform for bringing women from the most remote areas together to enable them to challenge those unspoken issues usually locked within their cultural context.

WIN at that time was also open to men, whom we accepted because they believed in the same things and were true feminists. Feminism



was much more than being a woman. But men started to dominate the way we organised ourselves and wanted to teach us how to run the organisation. With these power struggles over the management of the organisation, the dynamics changed and women withdrew, and so WIN became a shadow of itself.

The greatest challenges came when we started setting up our individual NGOs. Where would we get the resources to do the things we wanted to do with WIN, which at the time depended solely on its small membership fees? In the end, the NGO work took quite a lot of energy from us. We were no longer accountable to ourselves; we were now accountable to development partners and international donors. We started to structure our narrative to fit into “development” discourse. We lost the energy that came from being an independent movement. We even started to fight against each other for funding while we should have paid attention to better understanding the intersections between those NGOs directly challenging patriarchy and demanding equal rights and NGOs less willing to challenge the status quo but committed to alleviating the negative impacts of patriarchy on women through development.

Nowadays, many women engage in different ways to challenge the same structures. They are calling patriarchy out and asking people to be answerable. But the women’s movement today is not as large as it used to be because many spaces have been taken back by the power-brokers within the political circles.

Looking at what we have been able to do over the last couple of months, regarding Covid-19 and gender-based violence, there was again immense energy and power, just like when Maryam Babangida

Nigerian protestors demand an urgent government response to reports of sexual violence and femicide during the Covid-19 lockdown. The June 2020 protests were led by the State of Emergency GBV Coalition. Photo: Tobi Tej x Stand to End Rape Initiative, courtesy of Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi.

created a major force of change in the 1990s. But despite all the advocacy and programmes towards mainstreaming women's rights and equality, government policies and actions are nowadays slow, if not almost non-existent.

---

In many ways, it feels as if there is a movement among young feminists, but I can feel a disconnect between the younger and the older generations. We seem to be reinventing the wheel although we do not have to, as the legacy has already been created.

---

**OA:** In many ways, it feels as if there is a movement among young feminists, but I can feel a disconnect between the younger and the older generations. We seem to be reinventing the wheel although we do not have to, as the legacy has already been created. Although I heard about the Nigerian Feminist Forum a few years ago, I still don't know how to become a member.<sup>4</sup> Many feminists of my generation in Nigeria only celebrate feminists who live in the

US, and they don't know what WIN is. We do not have an analysis or a framework for connecting our ideological feminist positions to the realities of rural women like Babangida's campaign did.

We understand the intellectual underpinnings of feminism and use it to organise protests against very specific issues, like sexual violence, but very rarely does it branch out into other aspects in the way women in the 1980s and 1990s were organising and making class-based demands for access to rights. Today, it is more about individualistic desires for safety, freedom and power in a conservative Nigeria. For young feminists, sexual violence is absolutely the central issue. Class-based solidarity and entering into electoral politics are not the main concerns among the young feminists.

*Nigerian photographer and documentary maker Nengi Nelson portrays the limitations imposed on women's mobility in space and identity in Lagos. The photo is part of a project by Adeola Olagunju, in partnership with the HBF Abuja office, exploring issues of patriarchy in the use of public space and the female gaze.*





It was only when I worked with an NGO on urban evictions that I came into contact with intersectionality in real time. It became apparent to me how income poverty complicates questions of gender experiences, where gender-based violence is just one out of many pressing issues and might not take priority. And these pressing issues are not at the forefront for young feminists, including myself. I have no concept of how that would actually work, how young feminists could approach the community-building, mobilisation and activation of women. We just don't have the framework, we don't have the understanding, and we don't have the political orientation to enable us to mobilise to such an extent. We are preoccupied with how we survive Nigerian patriarchy.

Religion and queer rights have become much more prominent factors in the conversation about womanhood, women's rights and gender identity. What has been the impact of this on the feminist movement?

**OA:** Absolutely, I agree with you. Being a queer Nigerian, I can't separate my queerness from my womanhood. The question of ideological integration is important for me, and so, if I show up in the feminist movement, I would do so as a queer feminist. And for many Nigerian feminists, that is unacceptable. Yet there are many young people coming to feminism because of their sexuality as it offers the opportunity to dismantle the social structures that create marginalisation and oppression – not just for heterosexual women but for queer people as well.

That ideological friction is much more apparent now than it would have been during the Beijing movement. At the time, the movement was very clearly focused on women's rights – sexuality wasn't even on the table – and it was about access to rights and access to resources without the complexity of sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Now that sexuality has been recriminalised in Nigeria with the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013, it has come to the forefront in a way that it didn't before.

For queer feminists, this raises the question: should I dedicate my radical energy to a movement that only wants my womanhood and does not want my queerness? I would not even be able to rely on the women's rights movement to fight for me in the way we have been fighting for women, given that women's rights organisations didn't fight against the Act in the way they usually would with "feminist" issues. So, should I even bother to explain my perspective to them? The ideological tension is very apparent now, in a way it would not have been before.

**NT:** You make a good point here about ideological tension in the women's movement in Nigeria. Concerns for women that come into the mainstream are also radical in their own terms, but they may not be as radical to the point you are talking about. You must also bear in mind that people don't change society overnight. You do not lose anything by keeping your womanhood and queerness separately because when you get into the political and public space with both, you will have to fight too many wars and your personal identity begins to fight the other part of what you are trying to achieve.

---

For queer feminists, this raises the question: should I dedicate my radical energy to a movement that only wants my womanhood and does not want my queerness?

---

**OA:** My personal struggle is also political. It would mean to be in a movement that explicitly does not see you, and that your experiences do not result in the same political demands and consequences. Maybe particularly because of the recriminalisation of queerness in Nigeria, it will be impossible for me to say, “Let’s put this one on the side and focus on the other issue.” It is possible for me to campaign on sexual violence as a Nigerian woman, yes – but, as a queer woman, I face forces that a heterosexual Nigerian woman doesn’t have to face. Separating the two is untenable, and yet I don’t know how the two can be reconciled. There is no preparedness in the Nigerian feminist movement to move towards the understanding that there is no coherent way of separating the two for people who are coming to feminism because of their queerness.

**NT:** I can’t challenge you on that. But there is so much work to be done in the traditional context in which feminism is understood in Nigeria. The more space we gain on that front, the more space we can

open up to gain for queerness. My point is that you need a bit more strategic thinking. You want to be at the table where you can discuss the things you believe in. We can liberate women only from a position of power, that’s why I am still in the political sphere. It’s a chicken-and-egg situation but it’s also a personal choice and that’s why I say there are many strings of feminism, one mustn’t

over-cloud the other. The argument in the end is about our liberation, the liberation of spaces and opportunities and access.

Given some of your concerns, a community of young feminists should come together to start an exchange with women active in the political sphere who end up being in positions where laws are made. You need to have access to the spaces where the criminalisation of queerness, for example, is happening and start to find allies. It’s a long journey. I belong to a platform called Women for Women Community, where we mentor younger women to fight for changes in the society, holding hands and becoming a strong force.

We in the older generation are not so good with social media but we should draw from the expertise of the younger generation. We should also start to share the stories of our past and write them down so that the young ones can find their own identities within these stories and find strength to engage with that. There has to be a mentoring process on how to talk to a political space that is made up of men and women who have been, or who are in, power positions. We need to bring them out of their comfort zones, so that they gradually get to hear the personal stories and concerns. You first of all need to know your allies and how to face people who do not support you.

**OA:** Addressing this disconnect is key. We are doing a lot of things we shouldn’t do because they have already been done. The opportunity to build on what you have already done is extremely appealing to me. There are many young ones well connected through their work with NGOs, but we also have to bring in those who are outside the NGO space, who are creating communities and conversations online through social media. We need to establish relationships with older feminists. ■■■

---

Maybe particularly because of the recriminalisation of queerness in Nigeria, it will be impossible for me to say, “Let’s put this one on the side and focus on the other issue.”

---

- 
- 1 The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was convened by the UN in Beijing, China in September 1995.
  - 2 The Child Rights Act was passed into law in Nigeria in 2003. By October 2020, however, 11 of the country's 36 states had yet to domesticate it into state law. Domestication efforts on CEDAW, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, began in 2006, but up to today, issues of reproductive rights meet resistance among a number of lawmakers. Nevertheless, important policies like the Gender Policy and programmes like "Girls Not Brides" came from these domestication struggles.
  - 3 The Better Life for Rural Women Programme was established in 1987 by Maryam Babangida. It worked with rural women to increase their access to healthcare and income-generating opportunities and to include women's needs in national development plans. It led to the establishment of the National Commission of Women which was later upgraded to the Ministry of Women Affairs. The programme drew criticism because its funding through government allocations was unconstitutional, it lacked transparency and accountability, and it was feared that it would be misused as a political tool by the military dictator.
  - 4 The Nigerian Feminist Forum (<https://www.facebook.com/NigerianFeministForum>) started in 2006 as an offspring of the African Feminist Forum. It organises biannual conferences that bring together Nigerian feminist thinkers and women's rights activists, although it uses a rather low-key approach.
  - 5 It is, however, important to note that Bev Ditsie, a South African queer rights activist, made a groundbreaking speech at the Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, insisting that every woman has the right to determine her sexuality free of discrimination and oppression. See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/aug/20/beverley-ditsie-the-south-african-woman-who-helped-liberate-lesbians-everywhere>.

# Can We Imagine a Feminist Future Within Religion?

Wanjiru Nguhi

The end of my Evangelical Christian journey was marked by a series of discomforts at the things I had heard from the pulpit. I felt so guilty questioning these things until I read the book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. Reading the book gave me unexplainable courage and normalised the practice of questioning widely accepted but harmful statements. Questioning without guilt and malice was the beginning of my freedom.

It was this courage that led me to question why choosing to have sex on your own terms was unacceptable because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit that need protection. Where was the Holy Spirit when the temple was a child being raped by a priest, a rape survivor, a victim of police brutality, a woman trapped in an abusive marriage? Does the Holy Spirit also protect temples that aren't straight or cisgender? I questioned why the church was more comfortable organising women's meetings that focused on male-inflicted problems like violence, abuse and rape, as opposed to holding men accountable for the harm women are forced to survive. Patriarchy was never going to protect me and others more vulnerable, regardless of how much we abided by its standards. Love cannot be called love in the absence of safety. Love must be deliberate about eliminating abuse, discrimination and oppression. Loving myself fiercely began when I left the church, and it was that fierce love that led me to feminism.

In this article, I will talk about the patriarchal nature of Christianity, the role Christianity has played as a hindrance to

the African feminist movement, and highlight instances where imagination has been attempted. I will also argue that, even though religion has presented itself as an institution capable of change and evolution, the opportunities within religion to imagine freedom and safety for women and members of the LGBTQ+ community have been obscured by its deeply patriarchal nature.

When writing this article, I wrestled with the question, "Can one be a Christian feminist, or do we need to imagine spirituality outside of religion?" Leaving feels like a personal solution to an institutional problem because it doesn't stop being harmful because we left. It then led me to ask, "What is the scope of our responsibility as feminists who have left the church towards holding it accountable for the harms against women and the LGBTQ+ community still in church?" Even though I make the argument that patriarchy within religion manifests itself in dizzying proportions, I cannot demand that, to be feminist, you must leave the church.

## Historical Intersection of Religion, Culture and Patriarchy

The study of African indigenous religion reveals that African communities were not culturally androcentric or single-sex based. Most African societies had dual and flexible gender constructions that empowered both sexes.<sup>1</sup> Among the Igbo, for example, both genders are recognised and given social, economic, political and spiritual powers.<sup>2</sup> Even though most African societies



**Wanjiru Nguhi** is a lawyer, Afro-politico-feminist and feminist writer. She is also the founder of Mwafrika Mwenzangu, an organisation created to discuss political processes and how women experience political under-representation.



had a matriarchal gender system, there was a sustained gender struggle between the sexes, with patriarchy trying to subordinate women to its rule through ritual, economics and law.<sup>3</sup>

Africa's pre-colonial religion had no distinction between the sacred and the secular.<sup>4</sup> The religion reflected the culture of the people who practised it, and so the misogyny in the culture was projected onto the religion. For example, among the Ibibio of Nigeria, the women's cult kept the secrets of the divinities, who were avenging spirits, and the Great Mother, who was the supreme creator. The men accidentally stumbled into and captured the shrine of the Great Mother. The young women, in a bid to protect themselves, voted to teach the men the secrets of the cult. When the men gained this knowledge, they beheaded the priestesses in charge of the shrine and took it over. Since women were the custodians of farming secrets that were associated with the cult of the Great Mother, the men learnt how to farm yam. The Yam Festival, which was held to honour the earth goddess, then became a men's festival and the goddess a

deity of men's secrets and secret societies.<sup>5</sup>

Among many African communities, such as the Igbo of Nigeria, the matriarchal societies of Malawi, the Herero of Botswana and the Agikukyu of Kenya, the subordination of women was finally sealed through colonialism and Christianity. Christian schools insisted on religious conversion as part of admission and provided a very masculine-centred gender education.<sup>6</sup>

## How African Women Experienced the Patriarchal Nature of Christianity

In its pioneering missionary stage, Christianity masqueraded as an advocate for equality between the sexes. Given the encroachment of patriarchy into traditional faith practices before the coming of missionaries, African women experienced Christianity as empowering. It offered relief from the male-dominated sacred world and traditions like female circumcision, polygamy and the pursuit of alleged witches. The

*Young woman at a women's rights protest.*

© Nicky Newman

missionaries' interest in vulnerable women appealed to those who felt victimised by these traditional practices. The attraction of African women to Christianity is something we continue to see today, with women being dominant members of mainstream, Pentecostal, African religion and charismatic movements. Even though women form the majority in these churches, they are not represented in the leadership, history and power structures. Despite this invisibility, and regardless of their social, financial or academic standing, women have been fully devoted to the church. In my opinion, it is this devotion that has contributed immensely to the growth, stability and continued relevance of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Patriarchy has defined women as inferior, thus perpetuating their marginalisation and oppression. The resulting unequal gender relations have translated into male dominance and female subservience in church and society. Christian women's aspi-

---

Jesus was feminist because he spoke out against blaming women for men's lustful behaviour, preached that women should be treated with dignity, and said nothing about LGBTQ+ people.

---

rations have been heavily influenced by the desire to live up to the examples in the Bible, like the woman in Proverbs 31 who is hard-working and brings repute to her husband through her industrious ways. The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, emphasises virginity or sexual purity and obedience without question. The story of Queen Vashti is used to warn women against publicly disagreeing with and embarrassing their husbands, while Queen Esther is hailed as a heroine for using her beauty and charm to save her people, the Jews, from being killed by Haman, the king's vizier. These stories have the effect of decentering the woman from her own life and emphasise the need for her to cater to the male gaze and be a helper to a husband who is the unquestioned head of the home to whom a woman must submit.

It has been argued that Jesus was feminist because he spoke out against blaming women for men's lustful behaviour, preached that women should be treated with dignity, and said nothing about LGBTQ+ people. However, to be a feminist is

to not only point out the unequal distribution of power in a society, but also to work towards dismantling patriarchal and oppressive structures. Demanding that women be treated with dignity is not feminism: it is the bare minimum for any member of society. Being silent about the LGBTQ+ community isn't feminism either, because silence does not and never will make one an ally.

The church opened up new opportunities for women through education for girls.<sup>8</sup> This has been called empowerment, but it operated through discriminating practices like locking women out of leadership structures. The Bible also expressly prohibits women from speaking in church: "Women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says" (1 Cor. 14:34, English Standard Version).

African women who did become leaders and spiritual authorities did so at great personal cost and as resistance, whether deliberately or not. Kimpa Vita, who was later baptised Dona Beatriz, founded the Antonian movement in the Kingdom of Kongo in 1704. During a tumultuous socio-political time, she challenged the ideology of white supremacy and called for the removal of white portraits, for cultural nationalism, political unity and self-determination. This threatened the Portuguese Roman Catholic Church's relevance and authority. Her message appealed to the people because of her re-interpretation and re-imagination of Kongo and of Catholic beliefs and practices. She was accused of propagating heresy because of her attack against Portuguese hegemony and was burnt at the stake in 1706.<sup>9</sup>

Alice Lenshina Mulenga founded the Lumpa Church in Zambia in 1954, also during politically turbulent times. Her church drew many women because she was pro-monogamy and denounced widow inheritance and other practices that harmed women. She faced hostility from local traditional chiefs who felt that her overwhelming authority threatened their positions. Her church was known for reforming both indigenous and exogenous traditions and establishing a community that provided security in the midst of political and social upheavals. She was imprisoned by the Kaunda government in 1964 for being the leader of a religious cult and died in 1978.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did these leaders' spiritual movements manage to break barriers in

patriarchal culture, they have also contributed to the evolution of a new concept of church that is inclusive and recognises the different talents and contributions of both men and women.

## Patriarchal Christianity and African Feminism

As a feminist, I recognise the Bible as a patriarchal document. I have experienced the ways that churches read and interpret it to support and perpetuate patriarchy. The Bible was produced within patriarchal structures and continues to be interpreted by church leaders who are also situated in such structures.<sup>11</sup> The most troubling aspect is how uncritically the Bible is taken as the word of God. There is no critical and contextual engagement with the text, which leads to discrimination against women on various issues. Furthermore, church leaders can use

---

There is no critical and contextual engagement with the text, which leads to discrimination against women on various issues.

---

the text selectively to perpetuate patriarchy and the unquestioned submission of women to men in their homes.<sup>12</sup>

Churches classify issues as either spiritual or physical and teach that the spiritual is more important than the physical. This distinction becomes dangerous when cases of abuse, gender-based violence and poverty are seen by the church as physical problems. Thus, these are personal responsibilities, and the church can absolve itself from its institutional responsibility for the care and protection of survivors of abuse.<sup>13</sup> Many women are encouraged to persevere, to stay with, and pray for, their abusive husbands. Suffering is also preached as a

*"Black of My Flesh" by photographer Lebo Thoka is part of a series that explores black womanhood within patriarchal and theological structures.*



Christian virtue that produces endurance, especially for Christian women. The Gospel requires women to forgive and reconcile, and this contributes to a situation in which Christian men can be perpetrators of violence without remorse or consequence, and where women continue to stay in these marriages.<sup>14</sup>

There has been some improvement in the leadership of many churches around the continent with the ordaining of female bishops, pastors, deacons and elders – with the exception of the Catholic Church. Women have founded and headed churches in Pentecostal, Evangelical, Charismatic and African Independent churches. Even though this kind of representation matters, it does not protect women and the LGBTQ+ community from the violence of patriarchy. Until religious leaders are committed to addressing and dismantling patriarchy, representation will always be cosmetic.

---

Until religious leaders are committed to addressing and dismantling patriarchy, representation will always be cosmetic.

---

The patriarchal interpretation of scripture has prevented churches from engaging with violence and harm comprehensively, and from addressing beliefs and practices surrounding gender equality. To do this would mean naming patriarchy and calling it out for the harm it perpetuates. Naming patriarchy as a system that harms women would mean displacing men as beneficiaries and leaders of a system the Bible itself upholds. It would also mean teaching women to decenter men, which would contradict a lot of the teachings, like how the Bible names women as helpers for their husbands, how single women are encouraged to serve the Lord diligently and maintain sexual purity for the reward of a spouse, and how weddings are celebrated as the best day of a woman's life.

It would also mean rethinking the stand on the LGBTQ+ community. In 2014, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni signed into law the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. Ugandan evangelical pastors had actively campaigned for this, claiming that homosexual practice is incompatible with scripture.<sup>15</sup> The law, which criminalises the existence of the LGBTQ+ community,

has created homelessness and joblessness, restricted lifesaving HIV work and enabled extortion by police officers.<sup>16</sup> In Nigeria, Catholic and Pentecostal leaders happily welcomed the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, which was signed into law in 2014 by President Goodluck Jonathan. This law has drawn a target on the backs of LGBTQ+ people: they are tortured, arrested and even attacked by local vigilante groups.<sup>17</sup>

Feminist theology has emerged to address the patriarchal nature of churches. Its goal is to reinterpret male-dominated imagery and language about God and to increase the role of women in the clergy and in religious authority, as well as to reconsider the stories of women in religious texts through a feminist lens. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian and one of the founding members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Countries in 1974, was concerned about the gender imbalance and so the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians was formally established in 1989. Women who have led this organisation include theologians Musumbi Kanyoro of Kenya and Isabel Phiri of Malawi. The Circle aims to create a feminist theological space, produce feminist theological literature, and support activism towards gender justice.<sup>18</sup>

Religion is one of the most important aspects of social practice for many Africans and it permeates African cultures and societies, including LGBTQ+ people and their forms of community activism.<sup>19</sup> *Stories of Our Lives*, an anthology and film by LGBT Kenyans, provides insight into how sexuality and faith are negotiated and reconciled through claiming the love of God, the idea of being created in the image of God, and the inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ. Despite the negative and harmful experiences in church, the Christian faith has become a basis for a new Kenyan LGBT Christian community, complete with a church which was founded in 2013 by a group of Kenyan activists to create an affirmative space for LGBTQ+ people of faith.

To conclude, churches have been a place of unspeakable pain, abuse, manipulation and neglect that the churches have not acknowledged, corrected, or taken accountability for. It has not been a safe refuge for the LGBTQ+ community, for women claiming their sexual and reproductive rights, or for congregants abused by their own religious leaders. Imagining a feminist future within



religion means imagining a religion without patriarchy, and a religion without patriarchy does not exist. Without dismantling patriarchy, our attempts to reimagine religion are like building a bigger house to accommodate the elephant instead of just taking it out. The elephant will always take up space, even if the space is somewhat safer. In the presence of patriarchy, imagining *within* religion looks more like negotiation than actual imagination.

As African feminists, we will continue to hold the church to a higher standard of inclusion and accountability, hold space for

---

Imagining a feminist future within religion means imagining a religion without patriarchy.

---

those harmed by the church, and engage with the work being done by African feminist theologians with the care and honesty it deserves. This article is an admission that I have not imagined the possibility of a feminist future within religion as it is, but I allow myself to ask those who can imagine this future, “How can I help?” ■■■

- 
- 1 Musa W. Dube, “Post-Colonial Feminist Perspectives on African Religions,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, edited by Elias K. Bongmba (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), 127–139, 128, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319233829\\_Postcolonial\\_Feminist\\_Perspectives\\_on\\_African\\_Religions](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319233829_Postcolonial_Feminist_Perspectives_on_African_Religions).
  - 2 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1987/2015), 17.
  - 3 Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, 28–38.
  - 4 Dube, “Post-Colonial Feminist Perspectives,” 129.
  - 5 Dube, “Post-Colonial Feminist Perspectives,” 131.
  - 6 Dube, “Post-Colonial Feminist Perspectives,” 131.
  - 7 Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “Gender and Power in African Christianity: African Instituted Churches and Pentecostal Churches,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Ogbu Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 410–445, 411.
  - 8 Mwaura, “Gender and Power,” 412.
  - 9 Mwaura, “Gender and Power,” 424.
  - 10 Mwaura, “Gender and Power,” 426.
  - 11 Sakenfeld, Katharine Doos, “Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature,” *Interpretation* 42, no. 1 (1988): 5–18, 6; Sarojini Nadar, “On Being the Pentecostal Church: Pentecostal Women’s Voices and Visions,” *The Ecumenical Review* 56, no. 3 (2004): 354–367, 366.
  - 12 Nadar, “On Being,” 359.
  - 13 Elisabet le Roux, “The Role of African Churches in Dealing with Sexual Violence Against Women: The Case of the DRC, Rwanda and Liberia (PhD diss, Stellenbosch University, 2014), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37436621.pdf>, 88.
  - 14 Le Roux, “Role of African Churches,” 71.
  - 15 Al Jazeera, “Uganda Church Rejects Anti-gay Criticism,” *Al Jazeera*, 2 February 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/2/2/uganda-church-rejects-anti-gay-criticism>.
  - 16 Human Rights Watch, “Uganda: Anti-Homosexuality Act’s Heavy Toll,” 14 May 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/14/uganda-anti-homosexuality-acts-heavy-toll>.
  - 17 Human Rights Watch, “‘Tell Me Where I Can Be Safe’: The Impact of Nigeria’s Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act,” 20 October 2016, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/tell-me-where-i-can-be-safe/impact-nigerias-same-sex-marriage-prohibition-act>.
  - 18 Peter White, “A Cry for Freedom: The African Women’s Quest in the Light of the Bible,” *Research Gate*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233919703\\_A\\_cry\\_for\\_freedom\\_The\\_African\\_women%27s\\_quest\\_in\\_the\\_light\\_of\\_the\\_Bible](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233919703_A_cry_for_freedom_The_African_women%27s_quest_in_the_light_of_the_Bible), 3.
  - 19 Adriaan van Klinken, “Beyond African Religious Homophobia: How Christianity is a Source of African LGBT Activism,” *The LSE Religion and Global Society Interdisciplinary Blog*, 20 July 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/07/beyond-african-religious-homophobia-how-christianity-is-a-source-of-african-lgbt-activism>.

# Living Egalitarianism: Recentring the Indigenous Matricentric in Africa

Bernedette Muthien

## Hymn to Isis

For I am the first and the last  
I am the venerated and the despised  
I am the prostitute and the saint  
I am the wife and the virgin  
I am the mother and the daughter  
I am the arms of my mother  
I am barren and my children are many  
I am the married woman and the spinster  
I am the woman who gives birth  
and she who never procreated  
I am the consolation for the pain of birth  
I am the wife and the husband  
And it was my man who created me  
I am the mother of my father  
I am the sister of my husband  
And he is my rejected son  
Always respect me  
For I am the shameful and the magnificent one  
– 3rd or 4th century CE, “discovered” in  
*Nag Hammadi, Egypt, 1947*<sup>1</sup>



**Bernedette Muthien** has held executive and senior management positions over twenty years in academia, civil society and the public sector in South Africa and abroad. She is an accomplished facilitator, researcher and poet who designs, implements and evaluates projects for diverse institutions. She has postgraduate degrees in political science, and over 200 publications and conference presentations, some of which have been translated from English into at least 16 other languages. She serves on various advisory boards, including international journals on human security and the International Institute on Peace Education. She co-founded Women’s International Network on Gender & Human Security (WINGHS) in 1998, and Gender Egalitarian, a global indigenous women’s network, in 2005.

## Not a Fairy Tale

All tales ostensibly have a beginning and an end. Some sagas continue in endless cycles of narration, like waves in the ocean, drawing energies from the infinite collective. This essay is one such story, drawing on the wisdoms of the past and present, and hoping to offer at least one spring daisy to the future. The many herstories of anti-patriarchal struggles should highlight the endurance of matricentrism before and during patriarchy, the plethora of diverse societies across the continent, and fractals of indigenous matricentric societies around the world.<sup>2</sup>

African feminisms have historically largely opposed, ignored or skirted the

reality of matricentric societies, with all their contradictions and other survival mechanisms. As recently as twenty years ago, several renowned African feminist academics based in Cape Town at the time, fearful of being written off by patriarchy, asserted that then-nascent studies into indigenous matricentric societies were illusory, that the matricentric was a myth. Yet the ancient family stories and realities lived not only in indigenous heads but in our very bones. These stories and realities are now increasingly finding their ways into publications by diverse African feminists all narrating their matrilineal societies.<sup>3</sup>

This article will reflect on some of the many African societies that are matricentric today, some of the central tenets of their egalitarianisms, and how we can mainstream these learnings into our thinking and practices for co-creating alternatives to the dominant capitalist heteropatriarchy. This essay deploys decolonising methodologies common to indigenous feminisms – including those of elders Ifi Amadiume<sup>4</sup>, Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>5</sup> and Barbara Alice Mann<sup>6</sup> – as indigenous African feminists continue to develop our own publications that reclaim the matricentric.

## O-void

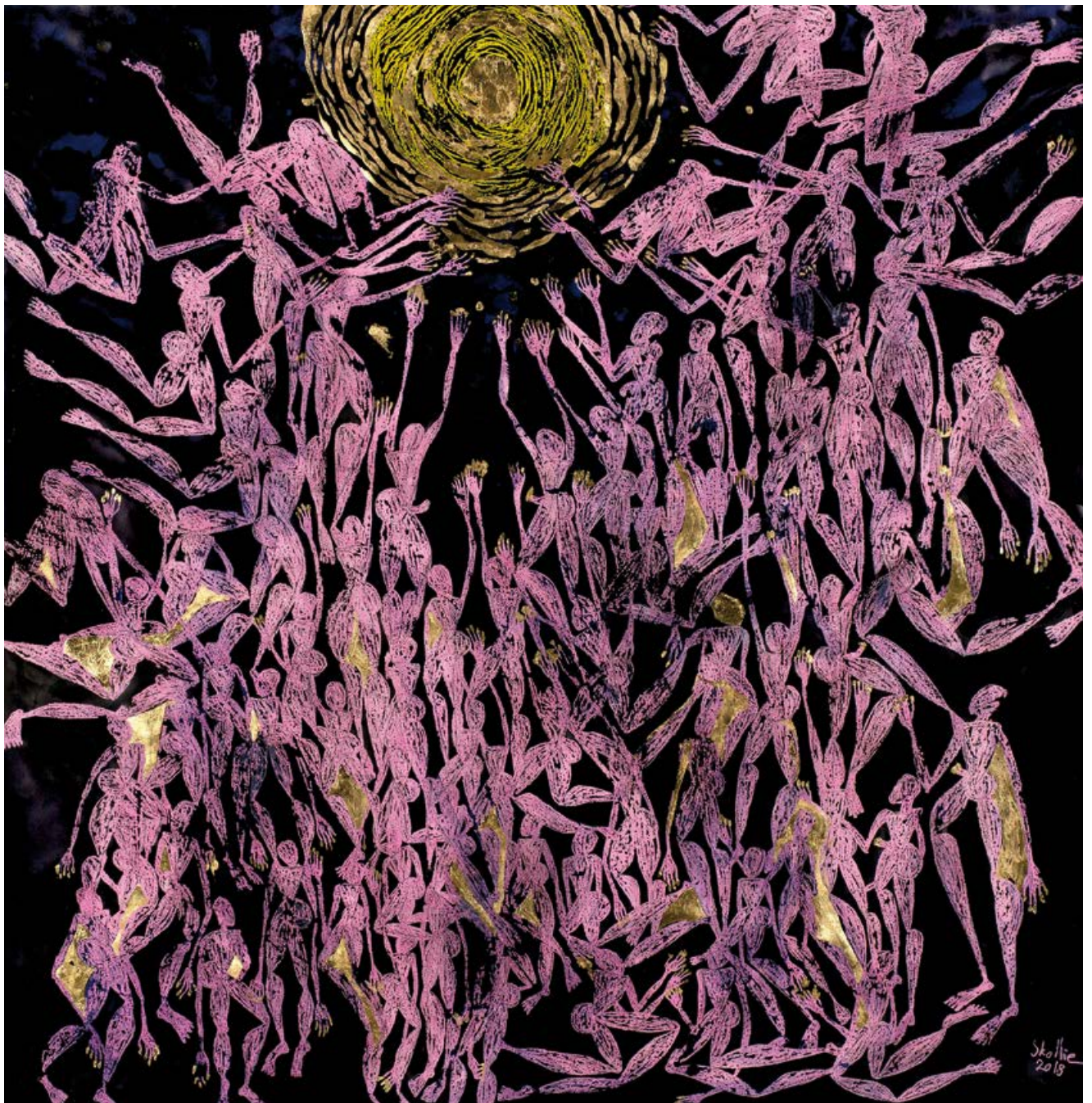
Most mammalian life stems from a womb, from the maternal. The English word “mammal” is derived from the Latin *mamma* or “breast”. Human life springs from the womb, from the mother, mitochondrial DNA a genetic gift from mother to daughter *ad infinitum*. Based on these matrilineal genes, geneticists, archaeologists and other scientists assert that all human life stems

not only from the vast continent of Africa (such as East African “Lucy”) but specifically from the Kalahari or Kgalagadi, a semi-arid region that straddles six southern African countries.<sup>7</sup> An area that some 200,000 years ago is said to have been an oasis, literally and metaphorically. Since the onset of genocidal and other depredations of European colonialisms<sup>8</sup> in the region, the Kalahari has been the habitat of the San people, pejoratively known as “Bushman”, or people who live in the bush. “San”, however, means human, person, *Homo sapien*.

Quentin Atkinson, a biologist and linguist from New Zealand who analyses the basic elements of words, called phonemes,

postulates that human language stems from the Kalahari San, based on the proliferation of click sounds.<sup>9</sup> Tracing the first human, the first woman, and the first language to the Kalahari San is important for a number of reasons. The San societies are known to be matrilineal, matrifocal and matricentric, centred around the feminine. Lineage is traced from mother to daughter. This is distinct from patriarchal societies where lineage is traced from father to son, a hierarchical society in which the feminine is reviled in favour of the phallic. By contrast with patriarchy, the matricentric San practice social and gender egalitarianism, with elected rather than hereditary leaders of any gender.

*Artwork by Lady Skollie, “We have come to take you home: A tribute to Diana Ferrus”, based on Ferrus’s 1998 poem to Khoisan ancestor Sarah Baartman who, in 1810, was taken from Cape Town to Europe to be put on public display.*



## Chicken or Egg: *Mater Pater Arche*

The word “patriarchy” is derived from its Greek roots, *pater* and *arche*, which can be translated as “father rule”, and interpreted as the rule of men over other men, women and children. The rule of men over land, seas, skies. This dominating attitude is encouraged and codified in the three Abrahamic monotheisms that strongly influenced the constitution of the colonial mind when reading their religious texts (the Torah, the Bible, the Koran). This hierarchical devaluating pattern is explicitly stated in the Bible, that men’s responsibility is to *dominate* the Earth, women, children, slaves, animals and other possessions (Gen. 1:28).

Heide Goettner-Abendroth argues that, since women are the sources of all human life, women do not need to rule over others, as the men who generate patriarchy feel the need to.<sup>10</sup> For Goettner-Abendroth, the meaning of matriarchy is not to be understood as “mother rule”, but as “mother in the beginning”. Also derived from Greek roots, *mater* and *arche*, but *arche* is interpreted in the alternative definition of “in

---

Decolonisation and the restoration of our ancient and existing indigenous knowledge are significant, given the matricentric communities that still exist across every continent

---

the beginning”, “in the principle” or even “at the origin.” In other words: this womb from where we all root. I prefer to avoid using the term “matriarchy”, since it is usually assumed to be the opposite of patriarchy, with women oppressing men. Instead, I deploy the more descriptive word “matricentric” to refer to women-centred societies that exist around the world to this day, despite patriarchal onslaughts.

## Indigenous is Not One Village, Africa is Not a Country

Decolonisation and the restoration of our ancient and existing indigenous knowledge are significant, given the matricentric

communities that still exist across every continent, and notably in Africa, including Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

As the second-largest and second-most-populous continent after Asia, Africa covers 6 percent of the Earth’s total surface area and 20 percent of its land area. Its over 1.3 billion people account for almost 17 percent of the world’s total population.<sup>11</sup> With more than 50 countries, and up to 3,000 different languages still spoken, Africa is an embodiment of diversities. Having faced patriarchal colonisations from different parts of the world and over various time periods, Africa has shifting herstories and political-economic geographies. These rainbows of matricentricity are visible in the blue-eyed Kabyle or Berbers of the North African deserts<sup>12</sup>, the tall Dagara or Dagaaba of West Africa, and my own matrilineal San of the Kalahari.

The Algerian Malika Grasshoff (pseudonym Makilam) demonstrates that women’s magic was expressed in every domain of their Kabyle lives, their traditional society incapable of functioning without women who ensured its material and spiritual unity.<sup>13</sup> Malidoma Some<sup>14</sup> and Sobonfu Some<sup>15</sup> of the Dagara variously discuss their matrilineal and gender-fluid culture, as does Nigerian Ifi Amadiume and increasingly more people across this immense birth continent of humankind.

Given the vastness of diversities and herstories, patriarchal colonisations, slaveries and dispossession, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), in Article 31, affirms that:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to *determine their own identity or membership* in accordance with their customs and traditions...
2. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine the structures and to select the membership of their institutions in accordance with their own procedures.

Thus, when I speak of my mother’s healing herbs and her people’s matricentricity, it is my chosen identity or membership, in a moment in all its heterogeneous polymorphous polyvocality. Ironically supported by the United Nations and UNDRIP since at least

2007, we indigenous speak for and define ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

## Rematriation

For some twenty years, we indigenous matricentric women around the world have explored the concept of Rematriation:

Rematriation of ancestral remains, spirituality, culture, knowledge and natural and other resources, instead of the more Patriarchally associated Repatriation. Going back to Mother Earth, to life and co-creation, rather than Patriarchal destruction and colonisation. As a restorative imperative, it is most relevant to feminists in general, since we, like Native peoples, need to reclaim our Feminist ancestry, feminist spirituality, feminist culture/s, knowledge and control over natural and other resources. We need to chart paths that are not mere alternatives to HeteroPatriarchalCapitalisms, but entirely reconfigure our cosmos, Rematriate our societies.<sup>17</sup>

Two decades later, in 2020, delightfully, there are websites and other publications devoted to Rematriation as an indigenous imperative.<sup>18</sup> The key principles of Modern Matriarchal Studies, according to Heide Goettner Abendroth, are: it is concrete rather than abstract in the world; it is not mother rule but non-hierarchical; it is based on consensus through systems of councils that are grassroots, consultative, participatory democracy; distribution (sharing) versus accumulation (hoarding); meeting needs versus power over; compassionate rather than selfish; radically oriented towards life rather than the patriarchal war industries; with political action always spiritual rather than the patriarchal detachment of the Enlightenment. Science, politics and spirituality are all connected.<sup>19</sup>

Ifi Amadiume speaks of matriarchitarianism, which she sees as less of a totalitarian patriarchal Eurocentric equivalent or opposite, and more as an alternative social structure deeply rooted in indigenous and African kinship<sup>20</sup>, a “paradigmatic pluralism in thought systems and social formations”<sup>21</sup>. She uses the term “matriarchal umbrella” to refer to inclusive traditional societies of protective women’s

culture, headed by matriarchs: women-generated socio-cultural institutions that historically have empowered and benefited all women in specific societies and cultures in Africa through women’s solidarity.<sup>22</sup> Amadiume speaks of the necessity for feminist indigenous scholarship to be interdisciplinary and intersectional, including spiritu-

---

There is often confusion about the patriarchal hierarchisation of genders and sexualities, which in indigenous societies has always been considered fluid and dynamic.

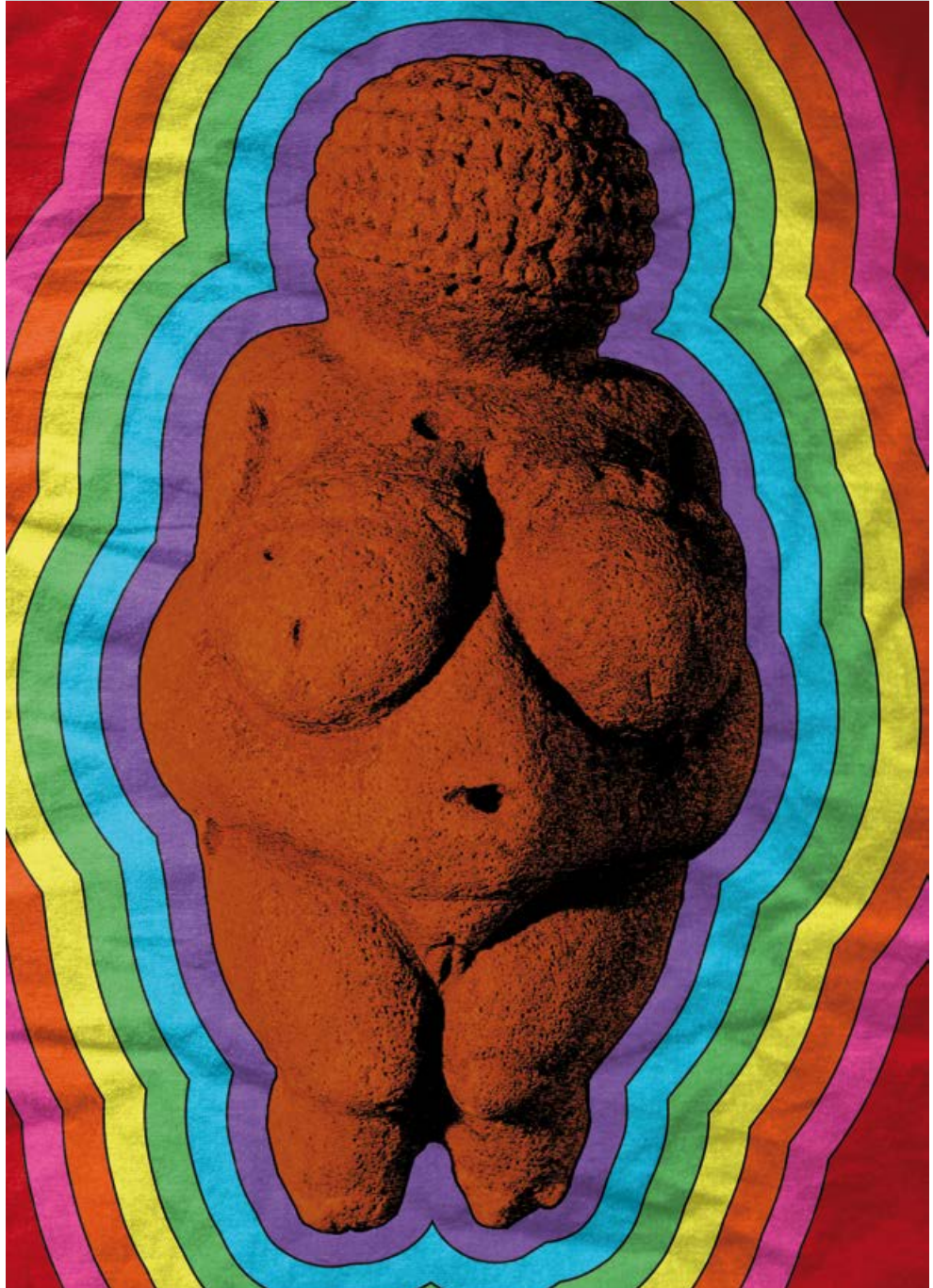
---

ality, and even prophecy. For Amadiume, “the matri-centric unit is the smallest kinship unit. Its material basis is concrete and empirical, while the material and ideological basis of patriarchy embodies a contradiction. Patriarchy is disputable since fatherhood is a social construct.”<sup>23</sup> Amadiume advocates for matriarchitarianism as an indigenous movement, rematriating activism back to our centre, our core, our African calabash.<sup>24</sup>

## Motherer

There is often confusion about the patriarchal hierarchisation of genders and sexualities, which in indigenous societies has always been considered fluid and dynamic. Similarly, with notions of parenting, motherhood, fatherhood and kinship, none of the roles are rigid or exclusive. To transcend the myriad of issues around any biological essentialism of “mother”, Genevieve Vaughan proposes “motherer”, so that anyone, irrespective of gender identities, can choose or be elected to “mother”, to be a motherer, nurturer, or to raise children. In many indigenous societies, including across Africa, the maternal uncle raises the boy children or male-identified children, at times called a “male mother”. Amadiume uses the gender-neutral Ibo term *ya*. Evo Morales from Bolivia refers to himself as a “matriarchal man” from an indigenous matriarchal people.

Zambia and Malawi are two other countries with matrilineal, and arguably matricentric, peoples, where a person is described through their relatives. For example, if I am related to the male in the family, I will be called by masculine terms irrespective of my biological sex, and I become an uncle,



*The Venus of Willendorf, adapted by Lydia Ruyle and Bernadette Methien.*

and so on.<sup>25</sup> Thus indigenous genders, and indeed sexualities, are fluid.

European anthropologists record up to 13 genders in some Native American societies. That is typical nonsense. The varieties of expressions of genders and sexualities are dynamic and infinite and beyond colonial abacuses.<sup>26</sup>

## The Matricentric

Matricentric social structure and social values are inextricably interdependent. Egalitarianism and fluidities of all things are at its core: social, gender, generational, sexu-

alities, all *ad infinitum*.

Patriarchal colonisation ideologically imposed gendered hierarchies and reviled beyond-heteronormative sexualities. So, too, the notion of a male human being or humanity (e.g., Rights of Man) as the centre of the cosmos, and even a male god (e.g., patriarchal Abrahamic monotheistic religions and patriarchalised ancient religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which at root are either multi-gendered or beyond gender). Like the Dagara and many other indigenous peoples, the Kalahari San have female deities or dual-gender deities.<sup>27</sup> One Kalahari healer, Ma Meneputo, describes

her carefree childhood hunting small animals like rabbits and young buck with a bow and arrow, and making and playing with dolls.<sup>28</sup> No Euro-formed binaried colour-coded games for her. When she does healing circles, it is her lifelong male partner who holds a space for her, gently offering her water as she emerges from the trance state, a form of care that patriarchy inverts to have the domesticated enslaved wife care for her conqueror hero Prince Patriarch.

In several African countries, especially older childless women enter into traditional marriages with younger women, procreate and raise children, an arrangement that transcends heteronormative patriarchy, and is extensively written about by Amadiume and others.<sup>29</sup>

Many Euro-formed social scientists studiously count genders in indigenous societies, always trying to label and classify, box, imprison. The notion of LGBTQQIA+ (referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual and other related identifications) in human rights advocacy and research is also dissonant with indigenous fluidities, where a human can potentially love other humans at any moment in time and circumstance. We are left trying at best to act freely within a rigid oppressive patriarchy that restricts our choices to alphabet letters when life in reality is a continuous series of breaths, or like the indistinct colours of the rainbow that flow into one another like drops in liquid. For the indigenous matricentric, fluidity is preferred to hierarchies and domination.

Nonviolence and peace, carefully codified through centuries of complex conflict-resolution methodologies, are intrinsic to matricentric societies, as evinced in the plethora of colonial texts referring to, for instance, “the peaceful Bushman”. Cooperation and collectivity rather than competition and rampant individualisms. Creativities rather than the rigidities of Roman-Dutch law, rules and roles.

The Gift Paradigm, in which needs are met through unilateral gifting, without patriarchal reciprocity or bartering, is a critical element of matricentric societies.<sup>30</sup> Here, generosity is practised over patriarchal selfishness and greed. Connected to all of this is Love or Compassion, “compassion”, feeling-with, akin to the African notion of Ubuntu, in which I am because I belong, I am because I care. To be compas-

sionate, to love, one needs trust and respect. Love of self and all can be contrasted with patriarchal self-loathing and systemic distrust and hatred of all, seen for example in the proliferation of firearms and mass shootings, especially in the United States and mostly perpetrated by white men.

One needs women, and motherers of all varieties, at the centre of societies, co-creating social values and practices that are humane and nonviolent, that nurture and foster individual and collective growth, that heal and care, that do no harm and definitely do not exploit. Interconnectedness and interdependence can be juxtaposed with psychotic patriarchal cleavages, separating the head from heart, top from bottom, the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” versus an indigenous “I care and belong, therefore I am”.

---

**Indigenous societies have compassionate spiritualities at their core, with feminine or dual-gender deities rather than a vengeful, raging patriarchal deity that inspires fear over love.**

---

Indigenous societies have compassionate spiritualities at their core, with feminine or dual-gender deities rather than a vengeful, raging patriarchal deity that inspires fear over love. Indigenous people are often called naïve for being trusting, honest and transparent. This indigenous behaviour is very different from, for example, a Viennese masked-ball<sup>31</sup> artifice that relies on masks and layers of obfuscation. The “naïve” Native relates to other indigenous as kin, rather than the extractive gazes and practices of the colonial. These are some of the basic elements of the indigenous matricentric for which our burning planet is in desperate need.

In conclusion, some indigenous scholars and activists have for decades wrestled with mainstream feminists, including in Africa, perceiving the latter as resistant, elitist, deeply immersed in patriarchal institutions of the academy and donor-funding, and thus fearful of upsetting their careful positionalities and hard-won privileges within the patriarchy. We must continue to challenge the ways in which even the African feminist mainstream centres the normative: for example, the patriar-

chal abhorrence of the matricentric and of gender and sexuality fluidities, as well as the ways in which other intersectionalities (including socio-economic class and education) are privileged and advanced in leading African feminist circles.

Not only should we rematriate our historically derided indigenous siblings, but so too we should critically review our relationship with the majority of women everywhere, majority women dispossessed by patriarchy and at times exploited for their knowledge and experience by the academy, NGOs and activists. These (even unintentionally) elitist African and other feminisms should of necessity re-centre the majority of women who have been historically marginalised by intersectional oppressions. Liberation, rather than transformation, will only be attained through concerted actions by and for the majority. Thus, privileged African and/or indigenous feminists,

including I, should relinquish power and work in solidarity with the majority of “ordinary” women hitherto ignored, exploited and abused, quotidian women who must and will lead the struggles towards post-patriarchal egalitarianisms. Women, including the indigenous.

In the words of Ma Meneputo, Kalahari San healer:

The San people found power in the light of the moon. The ancients made a queen and hoisted her up into the sky where she became the moon. The people danced in the light of the moon. This is where we found (find) our healing power.<sup>32</sup>

May our Moon inspire us to continue Rematriation, a return to the Mater, the Mother/er, the Uterus, where beginning and end are all one. ■■■

- 1 Translated by Paolo Coelho, <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2012/05/30/hymn-to-isis-3rd-or-4th-century-bc/>. Isis is an ancient African deity whose worship spread to the Greco-Roman world from the 4th century BCE.
- 2 See, for example, the work of Ifi Amadiume, including *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations: The Igbo Case* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1987/2005); *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender And Sex in an African Society* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1987/2015); *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997); *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 2000).
- 3 For example, Yaliwe Clarke and Chaze Matakala from Zambia, Namibia’s Elizabeth Xhaxhas, and Mozambican Paula Assubuji.
- 4 Ifi Amadiume, “Gender, Political Systems and Social Movements: A West African Experience,” in Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa* (1997): 109–143; “Religion, Sexuality and Women’s Empowerment in Nwapa’s *The Lake Goddess*,” in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, edited by M. Umeh (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998): 515–529; “Blood Solidarity, Bodies of Power: Framing Sexuality and Agency in African Matriarchal Cultures” (Keynote Lecture, for section on Body Languages – Body Signs, Bremen, International Women’s University, IFU, Hanover, Germany 2000); “Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy Water,” *Meridians* 2, no. 2 (2002): 41–66; “Prophecy, Authenticity, Oppositional Models: Writers and Politics in Africa,” *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 5–25; “Let My Work Not Be in Vain: Doing Matriarchy, Thinking ‘Matriarchitarian’ with Africa in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Ebrima Sall (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2015); “Women and Development in Africa,” *SGI Quarterly* (January 2005); “Theorizing Matriarchy in Africa: Kinship Ideologies and Systems in Africa and Europe, in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, edited by O. Oyèwùmí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 83–98.
- 5 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed, 1999).
- 6 Barbara Alice Mann, “Rematriation of the Truth,” presented at Women’s Worlds, Ottawa, Canada, 6 July 2011; *Daughters of Mother Earth: The Wisdom of Native American Women* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006); *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
- 7 Michael Slezak, “Found: Closest Link to Eve, Our Universal Ancestor,” *New Scientist*, 8 October 2014, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22429904-500-found-closest-link-to-eve-our-universal-ancestor/>; Garvan Institute of Medical Research, “The Homeland of Modern Humans,” *phys.org*, 28 October 2019, <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-homeland-modern-humans.html>; Shaun Smillie, “Origins of Modern Man Revealed: Africa is in Us All,” *Daily Maverick*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-10-29-origins-of-modern-man-revealed-africa-is-in-us-all>.
- 8 Colonialisms is used in the plural to reference its different forms, i.e., British, French, Portuguese, German.
- 9 Nicholas Wade, “Phonetic Clues Hint Language is Africa-Born,” *New York Times*, 14 April 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/science/15language.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/science/15language.html?_r=1).
- 10 Heide Goettner-Abendroth, *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past Present and Future* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2009); “Matriarchal Society and the Gift Paradigm: Motherliness as an Ethical Principle,” in *Women in the Gift Economy: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible*, edited by Genevieve Vaughan (Toronto: Inanna, 2007).
- 11 Worldometer, Population: Africa, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/>, accessed 14 September 2020.



- 12 Malika Grasshoff (Makilam), <http://www.makilam.com>.
- 13 Malika Grasshoff (Makilam), *The Magical Life of Berber Women in Kabylia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
- 14 Malidoma Patrice Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Putnam, 1998); *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Penguin, 1994).
- 15 Sobonfu Some, *Welcoming Spirit Home: Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999); *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).
- 16 "Ironic" because the very formation of the United Nations and its precursor, the League of Nations, served as vehicles for victorious post-war colonial powers to carve up the world, its peoples and their resources.
- 17 Bernedette Muthien, "Rematriation of Women-Centred (Feminist) Indigenous Knowledge" (PowerPoint presentation at Women's Worlds Conference, Ottawa, Canada, July 3–7, 2011), <http://www.gift-economy.com/articlesAnd-Essays/rematriation.pdf>.
- 18 See Rematriation Magazine: Returning the Sacred to the Mother, <https://rematriation.com>; Rematriating Borikén, <https://rematriatingboriken.com/rematriation>.
- 19 Goettner-Abendroth, *Societies of Peace*.
- 20 Amadiume, *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations*.
- 21 Amadiume, *Bodies, Choices*.
- 22 Amadiume, *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations; Reinventing Africa*.
- 23 Muthien, "Rematriation".
- 24 Riane Eisler's "chalice" is a European equivalent; see her *The Chalice & the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988).
- 25 Yaliwe Clarke, "Re-imagining Fluidity: Gender and Africanness" (presented at the Colloquium Celebrating 30 Years of Ifi Amadiume's Award-winning Text: *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Rhodes University, South Africa, September 2017); "Considering 'Gender Fluidity' in Zambia and Uganda: Femininities, Marriage and Social Influence," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (forthcoming).
- 26 Bernedette Muthien, "Queering Borders: An Afrikan Activist Perspective," in *Twenty-First Century Lesbian Studies*, edited by Katherine O'Donnell and Noreen Giffney (New York: Routledge, 2007): 321–330; "Playing on the Pavements of Identities," in *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994–2004*, edited by Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl (Cape Town: Kwela, 2008); "Heteronormativity in the African Women's Movement," *Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights Newsletter* 79, no. 2 (2003), <http://www.engender.org.za/publications/heteronormativity.html>.
- 27 Bernedette Muthien, "The KhoeSan and Partnership: Beyond Patriarchy and Violence" (Master's thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2008).
- 28 Marlene Sullivan Winberg, *Healing Hands: Interview with !Xun San Healer Meneputo Manunga*, South African San Institute, Kimberley, n.d.
- 29 E.g. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*.
- 30 Genevieve Vaughan, *Women and the Gift Economy: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible* (Toronto: Inanna, 2007). See other resources at Gift Economy, <http://gift-economy.com>
- 31 Julia Teresa Friehs, "Viennese masquerades," *The World of the Habsburgs*, accessed 17 December 2020, <https://www.habsburger.net/en/chapter/viennese-masquerades>.
- 32 In Winberg, *Healing Hands*.

# Testimony to the Power of African Feminists Across Time and Space

Njeri Kabeberi



**Njeri Kabeberi** is a director at Chapter Four Programs and Projects Ltd. She is the immediate past executive-director of Greenpeace Africa, and has worked for Amnesty International, the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy, and the Centre for Multi-Party Democracy-Kenya. She serves on the advisory boards of International IDEA (Stockholm), the In-Transformation Initiative & Democracy Works (Pretoria) and the Democracy Trust Fund (Nairobi). She has received international accolades for her work, including the inaugural Humanity Award for commitment to law and justice, from the Chamber of Lawyers, Frankfurt am Main; the Democracy Ribbon for commitment to peace and democracy, from the City of The Hague; an ILO Wedge Award in 2010 for promoting women's rights in Kenya; and a Lifetime Achievement Human Rights Defenders Award in 2017 in Kenya.

There exists, in the words of Mary Modupe Kolawole, "a commonality to the struggles women face across the world since the common factor is male privilege"<sup>1</sup>. Friedrich Engels calls patriarchy "the earliest system of domination"<sup>2</sup> and it is not natural, has not always existed, and takes different forms in all cultures and generations.<sup>3</sup> This article brings to the fore five powerful African feminists, across time and space, who display strong resolve and courage against all odds, representing an undeterred female-led revolution with a faith that can, and has, moved mountains.

These women who lived at different times and are of different cultures and generations share a common bond. All of them met with immense resistance from, and punishment by, patriarchal systems for visibly owning their power through acts of formidable courage. In these five women, we find voices of revolution, defiance, resistance and freedom, and free minds that have defied death. These women from southern and eastern Africa, who lived between the 17th and 21st centuries, have not sat down to write feminist theory, yet their lives and actions are a living testimony to feminist voices and anti-patriarchal struggles in Africa that continue to mentor our resolve.

## Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) of the Kongo (1684–1706)

Kimpa Vita has been fondly referred to as Beatrice of Congo and African priestess<sup>4</sup>, Congolese prophet<sup>5</sup>, the unity prophet<sup>6</sup>,

feminine Christ<sup>7</sup>, and the mother of African revolution<sup>8</sup>. She was born in 1684 into a family of Kongo nobility in the Kingdom of Kongo, some distance east of the capital of M'banza-Kongo in the town of Bakongo.<sup>9</sup> At the time of her birth, Kongo was torn by civil war.<sup>10</sup> The kingdom's disintegration was spurred by Portuguese military aggression emanating from the Angola colony to the south, notably at the battle of Mbvila in 1665, where Portuguese troops killed the Kongo ruler, Antonio.<sup>11</sup>

History tells us that Dona Kimpa Vita was later baptised Beatriz and used her Christian conviction to create a powerful political movement in the Kongo, Antonianism.<sup>12</sup> From an early age, Kimpa Vita was considered special. She was intelligent and spiritual and given to visions. As a result, she was "trained as a *nganga marinda*, an individual who consults the supernatural world to solve problems within the community"<sup>13</sup>. During an illness in 1704, she claimed to have received visions of St Antony of Padua, known for his powerful preaching, expert knowledge of scripture, undying love and devotion to the poor and the sick, and one of the most quickly canonised saints in church history.<sup>14</sup> Believing herself to be the reincarnation of St Antony, she attempted to restore the ideal of Kongo as a unified Christian kingdom.<sup>15</sup> The goal of her movement was to restore the fortunes of the once glorious kingdom of Kongo and to Africanise Christianity.

In November 1704, as the southern hemisphere's rainy summer got underway, Kimpa Vita and her followers arrived in M'banza-Kongo, which had burnt to the ground in 1678 and whose population had been forced to flee, tearing the heart out

of the country. With little food, it was hard going for the first few months. After that, the corn they had planted on arriving had ripened, and things became easier.<sup>16</sup> Her success in re-establishing the capital won her much respect from the peasants of the kingdom, and even those she had angered recognised this “to be an incredible act and led her to be adored and acclaimed as the restorer of Kongo”<sup>17</sup>. Among her many converts were Pedro Constantinho da Silva Kibenga, the commander of one of King Pedro IV’s armies sent to reoccupy M’banza-Kongo, and Hipolita, the wife of Pedro IV, who also became an Antonian convert.<sup>18</sup> Pedro IV, who had been guardedly neutral towards Kimpa Vita, now decided he would destroy her.

At the tender age of 22, Kimpa Vita was accused of heresy and burned at the stake on 2 July 1706 at the temporary capital of Evululu by forces loyal to Pedro IV.<sup>19</sup> She was tried under Kongo law as a witch and a heretic, with the evidence, consent and counsel of the Capuchin friars Bernardo da Gallo and Lorenzo da Lucca.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, the failure of Father Bernardo da Gallo to respect the seal of the confessional gives much of the insight we now have into Kimpa Vita’s life.

### Mnyazi wa Menza (Mekatilili Wa Menza) (1860s–1925)

Mekatilili wa Menza was a Kenyan woman who led the Giriama people in a rebellion against the British Colonial Administration. She was born in the 1860s at Mutsara wa Tsatsu in Bamba, Kilifi County on the coast of Kenya. For her political activities between 1912 and 1915, she was banished to Kisii, some 800 kilometres away from her coastal village. Twice the British exiled her, and twice she returned to her people in Mijikenda (legend has it she walked back both times).<sup>21</sup> These returns were an incomprehensible feat to the British, as the route wound through areas infested with wild animals.<sup>22</sup> The earlier disappearance of her brother Mwarandu by Arab slavers could have been the trigger and motivation for her resistance, which is said to have been economic and socio-cultural. She wanted to withhold Giriama labour from the British in order to protect the Giriamas (the largest of the Mijikenda communities that live in Kilifi

---

These women from southern and eastern Africa, who lived between the 17th and 21st centuries, have not sat down to write feminist theory, yet their lives and actions are a living testimony to feminist voices and anti-patriarchal struggles

---

county) from enslavement in a foreign land. Mekatilili also fought against British colonisation because it was undermining and destroying the Giriama culture.<sup>23</sup> She is considered a prophetess among the Giriama.<sup>24</sup>

### Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela (1936– 2018)

Born on 26 September 1936 and widely known as Winnie Mandela, she was a South African anti-apartheid activist and politician, and the second wife of Nelson Mandela. After Mandela was imprisoned, she became his public face and rose to prominence both nationally and internationally in the anti-apartheid movement. She was detained by the apartheid state security forces on various occasions, tortured, subjected to banning orders, banished to a rural town, and forced to spend several months in solitary confinement.<sup>25 26</sup>

Winnie Madikizela was 22 years old and standing at a bus stop in Soweto when Mandela first saw her and charmed her.<sup>27</sup> The couple married in 1958 and had two daughters, Zenani (born 1959) and Zindziswa (born 1960). The couples’ real married life could not have lasted the years of political turmoil, hide-and-seek, and finally the life sentence Nelson Mandela was given at the (in)famous 1963 Rivonia Trial. He was only released from prison in 1990, after 27 years. Mandela was to divorce Winnie two years after his release, citing infidelity as the cause.<sup>28</sup> When asked in a 1994 interview about the possibility of marital reconciliation, Winnie Mandela said, “I am not fighting to be the country’s First Lady. In fact, I am not the sort of person to carry beautiful flowers and be an ornament to everyone.”<sup>29</sup>

In the mid-1980s, Madikizela-Mandela had been accused of endorsing the killing of alleged police informers and apartheid government collaborators, and that her security



*Portrait of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela by Vienna Rye, commissioned in 2018 by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) as a tribute to women human rights defenders who are no longer with us.*

detail had carried out kidnapping, torture, and murder,<sup>30</sup> most notoriously of 14-year-old Stompie Seipei<sup>31</sup> whose kidnapping she was convicted of.<sup>32</sup>

Three days after Winnie's death on 2 April 2018, South African Police Commissioner George Fivaz stated, "I can say without any doubt in my mind that... there was no evidence to implicate Winnie to the Stompie Seipei murder. There was a malicious, deliberate attempt, in my opinion, to take that murder case and put it on the lap of Winnie and to say Winnie was responsible for that murder".<sup>33</sup> His statement came too late to exonerate or vindicate her name in her lifetime.

## Wangari Maathai (1940–2011)

*"That Kenya still doesn't know what to do with the legacy of Wangari Maathai says*

*more about a country at war with itself than it does about the activist hero."*<sup>34</sup> These words were written by writer and activist Nanjala Nyabola in 2015.

Yet, this is Professor Wangari Maathai. The first East African woman to earn a doctoral degree, in 1971, in veterinary anatomy.<sup>35</sup> The first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2004, for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace". An icon of Kenya's democratic movement, who repeatedly put not just her mind but also her body on the line in order to secure a better future for Kenyans and their natural environment.<sup>36</sup>

Wangari Maathai was born on 1 April 1940 in the village of Ithite, Nyeri District, in the central highlands of the colony of Kenya.<sup>37</sup> In 1977, she started the ecofeminist Green Belt Movement for sustainable development and environmental conservation. Its mission is to "mobilize community consciousness for self-determination, jus-

tice, equity, reduction of poverty, and environmental conservation, using trees as the entry point”<sup>38</sup>. Speaking later of her conflict with the government, she said, “*Nobody would have bothered me if all I did was to encourage women to plant trees, but I started seeing the linkages between the problems that we were dealing with and the root causes of environmental degradation. And one of those root causes was misgovernance.*”<sup>39</sup>

She was denounced and insulted by the government, with President Daniel arap Moi calling her a “crazy woman”, saying that it was “un-African and unimaginable for a woman to challenge or oppose men”.<sup>40</sup> In 1979, her husband Mwangi Mathai filed for divorce, and was said to have believed that Wangari was “too strong-minded for a woman” and that he was “unable to control her”.<sup>41</sup>

### Wanjiru Wanjira (1995–)

Wanjiru Wanjira was born on 3 May 1995 to Esther Wanjiru and Francis Njia.<sup>42</sup> She has lived in Mathare – a collection

of slums in Nairobi, Kenya, with a population of approximately 500,000 people<sup>43</sup> – all her life. It was at Valley View Academy, her primary school, where she would meet an inspirational figure and her first mentor, Chaplain Barry Msumba who encouraged her and other learners that they could become whomever they wanted.

She was admitted into the University of Nairobi in 2015 but dropped out after one year due to lack of fees and stayed out of school for two years. Then Yash Pal Ghai, a renowned expert in constitutional law, and his wife Jill decided to pay her fees. Wanjiru Wanjira is now a fourth-year student in international relations and diplomacy.

With her ‘new lenses’ of education and experience, she saw the glaring injustices in Mathare. Books on Kenyan history inspired her, particularly *A Prison Notebook* by Maina wa Kinyatti. In 2015, she and a collective of young community activists in Mathare came together to envision a centre that would promote more participatory forms of justice. Mathare Social Justice Centre was born, with the core agenda of fighting against extrajur-

*San Francisco street mural by Kate Decicco and Delvin Kenobe, celebrating the life of human rights and environmental activist Wangari Maathai.*

© (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Phil Dokus



These five women have a strong bond that joins their histories across three centuries. They faced immense resistance and were punished by patriarchal family, political or religious systems.

dicial killings and political impunity. She takes pride in notable positive milestones achieved during her joint leadership at the Centre, including the transformation of the media narrative in reporting extrajudicial killings. The situation attracted the attention of Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitration Executions, who participated in a community-led conference in February 2020 that focused on the rampant extrajudicial killings of the poor in Nairobi.

Wanjiru Wanjira is a professed feminist who believes in the equality of the sexes. She runs the Matigari Bookclub for children in Mathare and a Mothers of Victims and Survivors Network. She is also excited that the Mathare Social Justice Forum has inspired 30 other similar forums in Kenya for people living in informal centres. She inspired Kenyans on 7 July 2020 when she resisted arrest at a demonstration in Nairobi, standing up to police officers and chanting to the crowd, “When we lose our fear, they lose their power!”

Her voice echoes Kimpa Vita’s defiance of both political and religious authorities to create a revolution in Kongo in 1704, Mekatilili’s defiance of the British colonialists in 1912, Winnie Mandela’s defiance the apartheid system in the 1970s and Wangari Maathai’s defiance of government and business conglomerates to save the environment and fight poverty.

These five women have a strong bond that joins their histories across three centuries. They faced immense resistance and were punished by patriarchal family, political or religious systems. Their beauty is not just in their resistance, but that they own their power through acts of formidable courage. Their lives portray struggles for community, national, political, economic, environmental and socio-cultural rights and freedoms. Their unrelenting focus, purpose, and actions demystify the idea that a feminist does not have to be pronounced as such: it is the cause that makes one a feminist. The domination of the female sex over centuries and across continents gave rise to feminist movements to promote women’s rights and interests. Despite the patriarchal leaders and systems that have undermined their leadership and attacked their “womanhood” rather than responding to the global issues they have raised, these all-round leaders have surpassed the battle of the sexes. ■■

- 1 Mary Modupe Kolawole, “Transcending Incongruities: Rethinking Feminism and the Dynamics of Identity in Africa,” *Agenda* 17, no 54 (January 2002): 92–98, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10130950.2002.9676183>.
- 2 Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin\\_family.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf).
- 3 Alda Facio, “What is Patriarchy?” translated by Michael Solis (2013), <http://www.learnwhr.org/wp-content/uploads/D-Facio-What-is-Patriarchy.pdf>.
- 4 Dr Y., “Beatrice of Congo: the African Priestess and Prophet,” *African Heritage*, 16 June 2011, <https://afrolegends.com/2011/06/16/beatrice-of-congo-the-african-priestess-and-prophet>.
- 5 “Kimpa Vita,” *Wikipedia* (4 December 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimpa\\_Vita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimpa_Vita).
- 6 Carla Fernandes, “Kimpa Vita: The Unity Prophet,” 23 May 2020, video, DW Media Centre, <https://www.dw.com/en/kimpa-vita-the-unity-prophet/av-53546333>.
- 7 Francisco Filipe Cruz, “Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, feminine Christ, Angola / Kongo, XVIII century ...,” *LinkedIn*, 22 September 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dona-beatriz-kimpa-vita-feminine-christ-angola-kongo-xviii-cruz>. [Point your designer to this. Beautiful images of Kongo pendants of woman crucifix]

- 8 "Kimpa Vita, The Mother of the African Revolution," produced by Ne Kunda Nlaba, documentary, <https://www.amazon.com/Kimpa-Vita-Mother-African-Revolution/dp/B07DWH2NBB>.
- 9 John K. Thornton, "Kimpa Vita: Africa's Great Prophetess and the Anthonian Movement of Kongo," *African Heritages*, 7 September 2016, <https://africaheritages.wordpress.com/2016/09/07/kimpa-vita-the-great-prophetess>. M'banza-Kongo is currently the capital of Angola's northwestern Zaire province with a population of 148,000.
- 10 LLC Books, *Executed Women: Kimpa Vita, Olga Taratuta, Frankie Stewart Silver* (Memphis TN: LLC Books, 2010), <https://www.betterworldbooks.com/product/detail/Executed-Women--Kimpa-Vita--Olga-Taratuta--Frankie-Stewart-Silver-9781158725700>.
- 11 Alexander Ives Bortolot, "Women Leaders in African History: Dona Beatriz, Kongo Prophet" in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pwmn\\_4/hd\\_pwmn\\_4.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pwmn_4/hd_pwmn_4.htm).
- 12 "Antonianism, or Antonine sect, was a syncretic Bakongo Catholic movement formed in the Kingdom of Kongo between 1704 and 1708 as a development out of the Roman Catholic Church in Kongo, yet without denying the authority of the Pope." "Antonianism," Wikipedia (28 November 2020), <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Antonianism&oldid=991055806>.
- 13 Bortolot, "Women Leaders".
- 14 "Anthony of Padua," *Wikipedia* (8 December 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Anthony\\_of\\_Padua&oldid=993065703](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Anthony_of_Padua&oldid=993065703).
- 15 Cruz, "Dona Beatriz".
- 16 Ciaran Conliffe, "Beatriz Kimpa Vita, African Prophet," *Headstuff*, last modified 9 January 2017, <https://www.headstuff.org/culture/history/terrible-people-from-history/beatriz-kimpa-vita-african-prophet>.
- 17 Wikipedia, "Kimpa Vita".
- 18 Cruz, "Dona Beatriz".
- 19 Conliffe, "Beatriz Kimpa Vita".
- 20 Cruz, "Dona Beatriz".
- 21 Christine Mungai, "An Ode to the Comic, the Transgressive Counter to Stifling Official Narratives," *The Elephant*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.theelephant.info/culture/2020/08/06/an-ode-to-the-comic-the-transgressive-counter-to-stifling-official-narratives>.
- 22 Jason Porath, "Mekatilili wa Menza," *Rejected Princesses*, <https://www.rejectedprincesses.com/princesses/mekatilili-wa-menza>.
- 23 Neil Carrier and Celia Nyamweru, "Reinventing Africa's National Heroes: The Case of Mekatilili, a Kenyan Popular Heroine," *African Affairs* 115, no. 461 (October 2016): 599–620, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw051>.
- 24 "Mekatilili wa Menza," *Wikipedia* (10 December 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekatilili\\_Wa\\_Menza](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekatilili_Wa_Menza).
- 25 David Beresford and Dan van der Vat, "Winnie Madikizela-Mandela Obituary," *The Guardian*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/02/winnie-madikizela-mandela-obituary>.
- 26 Charlene Smith, "Opinion: The Conscience of a Nation that has Forgotten Apartheid," *The Mercury*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/opinion-the-conscience-of-a-nation-that-has-forgotten-apartheid-14240988>.
- 27 David Smith, "Nelson and Winnie Mandela's Marriage Ended, But the Bond Was Never Broken," *The Guardian*, 6 December 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/06/nelson-winnie-mandela-marriage>.
- 28 Robert Block, "Mandela: Winnie Made Me the Loneliest Man," *Independent*, 19 March 1996, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/mandela-winnie-made-me-the-loneliest-man-1342765.html>.
- 29 Derwin Pereira, "Invest to Rebuild S. Africa' Call by Winnie Mandela," Pretoria (22 June 1994), archived from the original on 25 December 2014, <http://derwinpereiramedia.com/singapore/derwin-pereira-invest-to-rebuild-s-africa-call-by-winnie-mandela.html>.
- 30 Paul Trehwela, "The moral problem of Winnie Mandela," *Daily Maverick*, 6 April 2018, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-04-06-the-moral-problem-of-winnie-mandela/>; Nastasya Tay, "Bodies Exhumed in ANC 'Murder' Case Linked to Winnie Mandela," *Independent*, 12 March 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/bodies-exhumed-anc-murder-case-linked-winnie-mandela-8531758.html>; Palesa Morudu, "Has truth become a casualty of Winnie's rejection of accountability?" *Business Day*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2018-04-13-has-truth-become-a-casualty-of-winnies-rejection-of-accountability>.
- 31 Adam Lusher, "From 'Mother of the Nation' to 'Mugger': The Turbulent Life of South Africa's Winnie Mandela," *Independent*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/winnie-mandela-dead-madikizela-nelson-wife-life-story-obituary-anc-football-club-soweto-apartheid-mother-nation-mugger-a8285581.html>; Wet, Phillip de Wet, "Bodies Probably Won't Bury Winnie," *Mail & Guardian*, 15 March 2013, <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-03-15-00-bodies-probably-wont-bury-winnie>; Andrew Malone, "Rough Justice for Winnie's Victims," *The Guardian*, 27 April 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/27/southafrica.andrewmalone>.
- 32 Ed Cropley, "Winnie Mandela, Tarnished 'Mother' of Post-apartheid South Africa," *Reuters*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-winniemandela/winnie-mandela-tarnished-mother-of-post-apartheid-south-africa-idUSKCN1H91A6>.
- 33 George Fivaz, "No Evidence Linked Winnie to Seipei Murder: George Fivaz," interviewed by Xoli Mngambi, *eNCA*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3VF468J398>.
- 34 Nanjala Nyabola, "Wangari Maathai Was Not a Good Woman. Kenya Needs More of Them," *African Arguments*, 6 October 2015, <https://africanarguments.org/2015/10/06/wangari-maathai-was-not-a-good-woman-kenya-needs-many-more-of-them>.
- 35 "Wangari Maathai," *Wikipedia* (9 December 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wangari\\_Maathai&oldid=993240568](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wangari_Maathai&oldid=993240568).
- 36 Nyabola, "Wangari Maathai".
- 37 Wikipedia, "Wangari Maathai".
- 38 Green Belt Movement, "Who We Are," <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>.
- 39 Biography.com, "Wangari Maathai," 7 July 2020, <https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>.
- 40 Cited in Keng Fang, "Wangari Muta Maathai: Fight Against Development," (Ecofeminism coursework, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2017), <https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/hp3203-2017-14/the-environment-and-government>.
- 41 *Wikipedia*, "Wangari Maathai".
- 42 The material in this section draws from a virtual interview with Wanjiru Wanjira, conducted by the author on 22 September 2020, and several follow-ups.
- 43 *Wikipedia*, "Matare" (28 March 2020), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathare>.

# Practical Gender Interests (Still) Matter

Nothando Maphalala

*The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations, which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships. – Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider*

Gender, like ethnicity and race, is a chance factor that affects how we view the world, how the world views us, and how we view ourselves. In her 1949 *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir noted how women, through learned, practised and inherited attitudes, do not place themselves at the centre of their worldview. She described three positions that, as a result of social constructions of gender, a woman will assume to avoid complete self-actualisation: to subsume herself as the Narcissist in her reflection, as the Woman in Love in her beloved, or as the Mystic in God.

De Beauvoir describes men as understanding their relationship to society as one of transcendence: inventing, creating and shaping the world around them. In contrast, women come to understand the world in its immanence, as they see the world as it already exists and they are one of the things existing in it, with no power to control it.<sup>1</sup> Not placing herself at the centre, she remains “the other” even to herself.

Since de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and the two waves of feminism and intersectionality that followed, Western feminism is no longer considered to be fully descriptive of the normative experience of all women. Sandra Harding refers to “socially situated knowledge” as a means to develop ways of looking at the world with women's lives and

preoccupations at the centre and with womanhood consequently as the norm.<sup>2</sup>

Diminished, erased and chastened by Europatriarchal worldviews, African feminists offer ideas to the long quest for gender equality with an Africa-centred black feminist sensibility. But African feminism is in no way monolithic.

Motherism, as defined by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, is concerned with achieving equilibrium in society through cooperation, partnership and tolerance.<sup>3</sup> Motherist movements inspire women to act based on their maternal identities, essentially characterised by nurturing and caring for others. While seemingly conservative, motherism is a radical notion in the world of Europatriarchal ideas, knowledge production and advocacy, as it is a view of the world defined by African women for themselves and, with that woman-centeredness, it is certainly feminist.

Motherism is feminism and indicates that non-Western feminists have always been willing to use their socially situated knowledge to advance their interests. While acknowledging its place in African feminism, what propels motherism's separateness from general feminism? Secondly, what impact has it achieved in terms of institutionalisation, transnational organising and shaping the rhetoric of gender equality?

In 1985, Maxine Molyneux distinguished between “strategic gender interests”, which aim to alleviate the subordinate status of women, and “practical gender interests”, which are urgent and do not entail immediate emancipation or gender equality. Under this typology, motherism, which often advocates around urgent needs of survival and subsistence, emphasises



**Nothando Maphalala** is a policy and advocacy specialist. She was the Femwise Mediation and Advocacy Officer at the African Union Mission in Juba, South Sudan. Her areas of interest are conflict transformation, gender justice and policy research.



practical interests, while demands that are generally termed “feminist” are strategically formulated on institutionalised forms of discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

Motherism offers women an important entry point into political activism as it legitimises women’s actions and softens the fact that they are acting politically. In Liberia, women’s wartime organising through the Mano River Women’s Peace Network, founded by Nobel Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, implemented motherist mobilisation, focused on the practical desire to end a brutal war and pave a better future for their children. The women’s network led a campaign that brought the leaders of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea – Charles Taylor, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and Lansana Conte respectively – to the negotiation table in 2002, although they were ultimately barred from participating in the talks because they were women. Ironically, the network didn’t make explicit demands concerning gender inequality or improving the status of women in any transformative sense. Peace – in this

---

**Motherism is feminism and indicates that non-Western feminists have always been willing to use their socially situated knowledge to advance their interests.**

---

case, the absence of violent conflict – was the resounding theme of the entire movement and a desire that resonated with the rest of society. This allowed the movement and its participants to straddle the margins of respectability comfortably. Their contribution to the signing of a comprehensive, inclusive peace agreement was, however, a strategic win for Liberian women.

In 1992, under the regime of Daniel arap Moi, the mothers of Kenyan political prisoners appealed for their sons to be released in a year-long campaign that included a hunger strike, a petition to the attorney-general and a march to Uhuru Park in Nairobi, where they camped out, refusing to leave until the prisoners were released.<sup>5</sup> After five

*A woman and her daughter in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. From “Daughters of Africa”, a series of portraits and interviews with four African matriarchs.*

© Pippa Hetherington



days in the park, a violent altercation with the Kenyan police ensued, and amidst the panic, some of the mothers stripped naked, an act that is considered taboo in African tradition. As one mother stated:

The ages of most of the mothers here are between 60 and 80. At our age, we cannot afford to be combative at all. Let me state that this is exactly what made us strip down to our bare nakedness. It was an indication that there was nothing else we could have done in the circumstances; nothing else could have saved us and our children from the punishment that was being meted out at us... That act brought about some immunity because, had we not stripped, we would have been killed at the park.<sup>6</sup>

For another year, the women continued to gain prominence and quickly become a point of political pressure on the government. In early 1993, 51 of the 52 political prisoners were released.

---

Motherist mobilisations frequently coalesced into broad coalitions that went from single-issue formations to membership organisations, and from national to pan-African levels.

---

Motherist mobilisations frequently coalesced into broad coalitions that went from single-issue formations to membership organisations, and from national to pan-African levels. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda that gained global recognition through the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (of 2000) was a key outcome of decades of coalition-building among grassroots and motherist feminists. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol) is also a transformative outcome of this type of feminism.

Fast-forward 25 years to a time where "feminist" no longer carries its early stigma and motherism appears dated. As Nanjala Nyabola writes:

We need new frameworks. We need new ways of thinking about politics

that have more utility because they are more representative of our lived realities. A feminist methodology can be this new framework. It highlights the many silences embedded in the prevailing discourse.<sup>7</sup>

African feminism today is louder, more straightforward and, at the same time, more mainstream (or as Tiyaambe Zeleza calls it, "malestream"). That is not to say that we live in a postracial, postfeminist and meritocratic utopia, rather that feminists don't need to pretend to be apolitical in order to advance political goals, as gender mainstreaming is standard business practice for small and medium enterprises up to multinationals and is firmly lodged in the public policy lexicon. While the mainstream is characterised by an engagement with feminist thought and advocacy, this is largely based on (and limited to) liberal feminist discourses with an emphasis on women's inclusion. How far have such "strategic gender interests" taken us?

Stereotypical gender roles are still obstacles to women's political participation and recognition. As Nyabola states,

Regardless of how smart, talented, accomplished, or connected you are, your value as a political entity is ultimately measured in relation to your nearness to a suitable penis. If you don't have one, are you married to one? In either case, did your gene pool flow from a suitably qualified one?<sup>8</sup>

The late Kenyan politician, academic and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai was described as "unAfrican, unKenyan, unKikuyu, unpatriotic, ungovernable, unmarried, unbecoming of a woman"<sup>9</sup>. Her presidential campaign in 1997 barely received press coverage, but her divorce was highly publicised.<sup>10</sup> Twenty years later and 750 kilometres away, Rwandan businesswoman and accountant Diane Rwigara's 2017 presidential campaign was marred by leaked fake "nudes" of her just 72 hours after it was launched<sup>11</sup>, paradoxically, in the country described as the best place in the world to be a woman in politics.<sup>12</sup>

As illustrated, the increasing presence of individual women in public life has not led to a proportionate transformation of perceptions of women in the public domain. Traditional expectations and patriarchal



*#AmINext, GBV protest  
in South Africa.  
© Nicky Newman*

mentalities regarding women as subjects of men's authority are known obstacles to women's meaningful participation in politics. Secondly, the presence of some women in elected office has not fully transformed into significant gains, such as increased advocacy for women, representation of their interests (however "interests" are defined), greater consciousness of women's needs, or facilitated cooperation among politicians and civil society. The presence of women in public affairs does not necessarily make an agenda or a policy more woman-centred, much less a force for addressing systemic gender inequalities. A study by Abebe and Woldeyesus in Ethiopia on the relationship between representation and substantive change in gender relations through the promotion of gender equality by women parliamentarians found that women MPs

---

To appreciate the origins of motherism is to come to terms with the fact that African women live and survive within a male-dominated landscape, caught between the private and public spheres, and the authoritarian post-colonial state and hetero-patriarchal nationalism.

---

had limited, if any, direct contact with their constituencies or with other women's organisations.<sup>13</sup> This is partly explained by what Deniz Kandiyoti terms "patriarchal bargains", a strategy that allows women positional power and status in exchange for their compliance and cooperation in male-dominated political space.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, it is clear that representation, while synonymous with institutional expansion, does not necessarily lead to a structural transformation in gender equality.

In recent years, vanguard forms of feminist organising have emerged throughout the African continent. This African feminism addresses class, gender and racial discrimination and is characterised by its use of social media to raise awareness. For instance, the #MeToo, #MenAreTrash, #AmINext movements have significantly changed how we speak about sexual and gender-based violence. But an over-reliance on public and media engagements cannot drive comprehensive change. As Minna Salami states, this "millennial or fourth-wave African feminism... does not gener-

ally engage with African feminist theory to the extent that they would revolutionise political life"<sup>15</sup>.

Perhaps motherism does have a place in contemporary African feminism?

To appreciate the origins of motherism is to come to terms with the fact that African women live and survive within a male-dominated landscape, caught between the private and public spheres, and the authoritarian post-colonial state and hetero-patriarchal nationalism. Under these multiple oppressions, it is perhaps necessary to employ multiple tactics. But it must also be acknowledged that motherism is problematic: it is rampantly cis/heteronormative and assumes that womanhood can only be attained through motherhood. Motherism simultaneously challenges and concedes to de Beauvoir's notion of immanence – with women mobilising on the basis of their physical identity (in this case, that of motherhood) and not being hindered by it.

In 1985, at the Women's International Peace Conference in Canada, the women delegates from Africa defined "security" as freedom from the structural violence caused by militarism, racism and sexism. Furthermore, they defined it by the quality and dignity of life. This humble submission caught on because, later that year, the same definition of security was echoed in the UN Report on Equality, Development and Peace. Almost a decade later, that definition of security was firmly lodged in the global policy lexicon, when the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report equated security with people, dignity and development rather than with states and weapons.

2020 marks 25 years of the Beijing Platform for Action and 20 years since the passage of UNSC Resolution 1325. It is an important year for a system-wide reflection and response to the challenges and successes of the past two decades of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Once more, a motherist perspective that would engage with the multiple interactions between frameworks, people and social contexts may be worthwhile. In connecting grassroots movements with elite structures, its "socially situated" understanding of the context could promote and implement the ideas and values that underpin the Agenda.

African feminists have always stressed that "smashing the patriarchy" is only half the battle, with imperialism and capitalism being the other half. Given the weight of

the challenge, a comprehensive approach may hold the best promise for African feminism to achieve the seemingly elusive goal of gender equality. One thing is certain:

some of the most transformative feminist triumphs from the African continent were motivated by women's practical desires for a decent life. And that is transcendent. ■■■

- 
- 1 McConnell, "Stuffing Myself".
  - 2 Sandra Harding. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity?" *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 437–470.
  - 3 Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Abuja: Afa Publications, 1995).
  - 4 Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no.2 (1985): 227–254.
  - 5 Amnesty International, *Women in Kenya: Repression and Resistance* (1995), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR32/006/1995/en>.
  - 6 In Amnesty International, "Women in Kenya".
  - 7 Nanjala Nyabola, "Kenya: It really is about dicks," *African Arguments*, 18 April 2016, <https://africanarguments.org/2016/04/18/kenya-it-really-is-about-dicks>.
  - 8 Nyabola, "Dicks".
  - 9 Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor," *Journal of Commonwealth and Post-colonial Studies* 13 (2007): 14–37.
  - 10 Versha J. Anderson, "Intersectional Activism: Wangari Maathai's Rhetorical Revolution for Peace, Democracy and the Environment" (Master's diss., Colorado State University, 2014).
  - 11 Kara Fox and Edward Kiernan, "She Wanted to be President, But Ended Up Jailed Instead," *CNN*, 28 August 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/28/africa/hfr-rwanda-diane-rwigara-asequals-intl/index.html>.
  - 12 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments* (1 October 2020), <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2020>.
  - 13 Tsion Tadesse Abebe and Elshaday Kife Woldeyesus, "The Influence of Ethiopian Women Parliamentarians on Policy Changes and Enforcement of Gender Equality Issues," *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal* 6, no. 1 (June 2013): 59–73.
  - 14 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–290.
  - 15 Minna Salami, "What is African Feminism, Actually?" *MsAfropolitan*, 6 December 2017, <https://www.msafropolitan.com/2017/12/what-is-african-feminism-actually.html>.



This publication can be ordered from our Africa offices:

**Cape Town Office**

Wale Street Chambers  
33 Church Street  
Cape Town, South Africa

T: +27 – 21 – 4616266  
E: [info@za.boell.org](mailto:info@za.boell.org)  
I: [www.za.boell.org](http://www.za.boell.org)

**Rabat Office**

17, Rue Tiddas, Hassan  
10010 Rabat - Maroc  
Morocco

T: +212-(0)-537 20 20 93 / 94  
E: [ma-info@ma.boell.org](mailto:ma-info@ma.boell.org)  
I: [www.ma.boell.org](http://www.ma.boell.org)

**Nairobi Office**

Prof. Wangari Maathai Road  
P.O. Box 10799-00100 GPO  
Nairobi, Kenya

T: +254 – 20 – 3750329  
E: [info@ke.boell.org](mailto:info@ke.boell.org)  
I: [www.ke.boell.org](http://www.ke.boell.org)

**Tunis Office**

5, rue J. Abdennasser  
1002 Tunis  
Tunisia

T: +216 713 22345  
E: [info@tn.boell.org](mailto:info@tn.boell.org)  
I: [www.tn.boell.org](http://www.tn.boell.org)

**Abuja Office**

93 Obafemi Awolowo Way  
Jabi District  
Abuja, Nigeria

T: +234– 80– 99905176  
E: [info@ng.boell.org](mailto:info@ng.boell.org)  
I: [www.ng.boell.org](http://www.ng.boell.org)

**Dakar Office**

Rue de Louga  
x Impasse PE 10 - au fond  
BP: 49 87, Point E  
Dakar, Senegal

T: +221 33 825 66 06  
E: [info@sn.boell.org](mailto:info@sn.boell.org)  
I: [www.sn.boell.org](http://www.sn.boell.org)

**Publication information**

Publisher	Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.
Publication Date	June 2021
Guest Editor	Melanie Judge
Editors	Paula Assubuji, Selly Bâ, Nicola Egelhof, Caroline Kioko, Claudia Lopes, Monika Umunna
Copy Editor	Helen Douglas
Cover Image	Headdress 4 © courtesy of the artist
Layout/Typesetting	Catherine Coetzer
Printed by	Hansa Print, Cape Town



Opinions expressed in the articles are those of their authors and not Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.  
All articles in this publication are subject to Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

## About the cover artwork

HELINA METAFERIA is an Ethiopian-American interdisciplinary artist working across collage, assemblage, video, performance and social engagement. Her work is informed by an interest in diaspora, migration and gender studies as well as traditional African art sensibilities where visual art and ritual often intersect. She has exhibited at various galleries and museums in the USA, Stockholm and Addis Ababa, and is currently an assistant professor at Brown University, living and working in New York City.

*Headdress 4* is one of the first iterations of Metaferia's "army of women" from *By Way of Revolution*, a series that collages activist histories from the civil-rights generations as crowns on contemporary Black women activists, drawing attention to the often-overlooked labour of Black women in care politics and social justice. This collage incorporates posters from the anti-apartheid struggle.



Cover Image: *Headdress 4*, Helina Metaferia, mixed-media collage, 104" x 48", 2019, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Helina Metaferia with *Headdress 4*, courtesy of the artist.