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**Africa's 21st Century Feminist Struggles:
Terrains, Formations and Politics**

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Editorial

Africa's 21st Century Feminist Struggles: Terrains, Formations and Politics

Dzodzi Tsikata and Lyn Ossome

Introduction

This issue of *FA* reflects on Africa's 21st century feminist struggles and movements, paying particular attention to the continuities and changes in terrains, organisational formations, politics, and strategies. The issue is inspired by the visibility of young feminist leadership in recent and ongoing struggles for decolonisation, democratisation, economic justice, and emancipation such as the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, otherwise referred to as the Arab Spring; the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall campaigns in South Africa; the Black Lives Matter movement; the uprisings against dictatorship and misrule in Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria; as well as more localised struggles against land and natural resource dispossession and immiseration across Africa. The unforgettable and emblematic media images of Aisha Yesufu of Nigeria and Alaa Salah of Sudan addressing massive demonstrations, and of young women leading campaigns in Tahrir Square, on university campuses and in the streets in Egypt, South Africa, and Namibia respectively, drew attention to women's leadership and unsettled notions that they are second-tier players in national, Pan-African, and global struggles. While for superficial observers the sight of women on frontlines was unexpected and new, feminist scholars, drawing on their research on the long traditions of women's activism, have seen these developments as a specific conjuncture in the movement building, thought leadership, and struggle credentials of African women.

The feature articles in the issue are the outcome of empirical research that builds on a respectable corpus by Africa's feminists; one that has chronicled rural and urban women's struggles for national liberation and for emancipation

and gender equality since independence, to which *Feminist Africa* (FA) has made significant contributions. This literature has shown that struggles during the colonial period in which women played pivotal roles such as the Aba Women's War in Nigeria, the cocoa holdups in Ghana, the Nyabinghi movements of East and Central Africa, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, the liberation movements against Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, and the anti-apartheid movements in Namibia and South Africa, have laid firm foundations for the more recent struggles against imperialism, neoliberalism, and dispossession.

This issue continues with FA's tradition of bearing witness to feminist politics by publishing the reflections of a new generation of feminist scholars and scholar activists. This is the first of two issues of FA devoted to examining how the current conjuncture of multiple and compounding crises of neo-liberal globalisation, demographic stresses, the regression of democratic impulses and intensification of State repression, corruption and ineptitude, has framed the demands of feminist movements. Contributions to the Issue suggest that these demands are often framed in ways that require a reassessment of- a) what is feminist; b) how changes in the terrains, methods, organisational forms, technologies and inter-sectional dynamics of struggles should be characterised; and c) their implications for the transformation of societies and the emancipation of all oppressed and subordinated social groups.

The seven feature articles are the outcome of a call for proposals for a three-year project on 21st century feminist struggles and movements to establish an inter-generational collective to research and produce informed accounts of particular experiences in Africa as a basis for theorising and supporting praxis. The overarching question of the project, "How are 21st century feminist struggles and movements in Africa constituted, and what are their contours, antecedents and futures?", has resulted in nuanced and thoughtful studies that also raise pertinent questions for future research.

African Feminist Movements in Historical Perspective

Women's modes of resistance have been theorised within African feminist scholarship that sheds light on a long "herstory" of African-descended women's engagement in multiple forms of collective and individual resistance to patriarchy and other forms of injustice (Kuumba 2006), by deploying, opposing, and transforming cultural systems (Collins [1990] 2000; Steady 1987, 1993; Terborg-Penn 1986). According to Steady (1993), distinctive female modes of resistance are often institutionalised in traditional African cultural systems. For instance, while there was wide variation across the continent, women historically played important political, religious, and economic roles as the primary agricultural providers, renowned spiritual leaders and organisers of women's societies (Sheldon 2020). The multiple and varied expressions of African women's resistance include the political and transformational uses of cultural practices, even those with patriarchal overtones. In her work examining African women's cultures of resistance and political uses of culture, Kuumba (2006) has argued that the patterns observed in various African contexts have served as a transformative praxis. This idea can inform studies of current anti-patriarchal and counter-hegemonic feminist struggles.

Further, feminist movements in Africa have cohered around different ideological positions in relation to the emancipation of women, extensive thematic interventions, varying methodological approaches to social and political organising, and distinct theoretical traditions across the disciplines and academic debates. These distinctions demonstrate both contestations internal to feminist movements on the continent and differences from feminisms embedded in the Global North or even other Black feminist traditions outside of Africa. A key terrain of African feminist intervention in social and political life evolved in direct relation to what colonisation did to women's social economies and power, and African women's responses to such interferences, which led to their pivotal intervention in anti-colonial struggles. Women's involvement in anti-colonial struggles is traceable to the early 20th century in much of the continent and gave original expression to modes of organising that continue to find expression in contemporary feminist politics (see especially Omotoso and Faniyi in this Issue; and Naicker in this Issue).

Colonial policies and methods of rule sought to suppress African communal and subsistence practices through policies that depended on the control and exploitation of women's reproductive roles. Such interventions in women's social domains in particular provoked widespread demonstrations in various parts of the continent, and the reactions of rural communities and political movements galvanised around issues that were distinctly gendered (Ossome 2018). African women's actions in anti-colonial struggles show how they appropriated and turned various symbolismisms attached to female sexuality into acts of resistance against the colonial State's dispossession of women's reproductive economies including land, labour, time, and community (Wipper 1989; Thomas 2003).

Colonial rule played a decisive part in the subordination of African women. The set of ideas the State engineered compelled women into specific roles, and in the process transformed women's agency, reinscribing their social roles with a "passivity" that belied the highly proactive and transformative nature of women's struggles and activities (Santoru 1996). Presley (1986) also notes the profound influence that the interaction between rural women and the colonial power had on women's political participation. These rural social movements, through which rural women fought against the redirection of their reproductive labour towards the State's accumulation project, should be read as a precursor to today's feminist agrarian movements in Africa. And as colonialism redefined kinship, production, and administrative systems in masculinist terms, so did women's modes of resistance increasingly reflect a feminist consciousness and struggle against their loss of autonomy, exclusion, increased workloads and reproductive burdens.

The early post-independence women's movements in Africa tended to focus on religious, welfare and domestic concerns (Tripp 2003). This was in keeping with the colonial legacy, which, as Seidman (1984) argues, emphasised women's reproductive labour within the context of the male migrant labour system, and exposed the European emphasis on women as dependent mothers in ways that limited their access to education and deepened gender inequalities. Women's contributions and experience in anticolonial struggles did, however, grant them significant space for recognition and political participation in newly independent States, with mixed agendas and outcomes, due in part to the contradictory nature of the State (Manuh 1993). On the one hand, the

push towards democratisation ushered in a greater variety of feminist voices and demands, informed by “feminist analyses of the role of the state as arbiter of gender struggles as they relate to issues of gender equity, equal access, and competition over scarce resources in the society” (House-Midamba 1996, 289; see also Tsikata, 1997). State feminism attained its peak in the early 1990s (Mama 1995), which undercut the voices of women at the margins while continuing to exploit their labour. Concurrently, the neo-liberalising State, indebted from the economic crisis of the late 1970s, ushered in structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) whose devastating social costs have constituted the basis of sustained feminist critique and activism.

Beginning in the late 1980s when structural adjustment took hold of the continent, disguising neo-imperialist interests, the accompanying political and economic liberalisation shifted struggles towards an intensified period of constitutionalism, which fundamentally structured and redirected feminist claims towards questions of human/women’s rights, political participation, representation, and a politics of recognition (See Hassanain and Sidig, in this Issue). Furthermore, the professionalisation of the women’s movement – the gradual shift from grassroots feminism in the colonial period, towards State feminism in the early post-independence nationalist period, to the neoliberal withdrawal of the social State that paved the way for nongovernmental organisation – what some have termed as “NGOisation”, gradually and ironically redirected feminist claims in a more structured manner through identification with the State. NGOisation of women’s movements is an organisational form quite distinct from earlier modes of mass organisation and feminist consciousness-raising, with characteristics that have differed across geographical and political contexts. For instance, discussing the nature of this phenomenon in Ghana, Tsikata (2009) traces the rise of women’s NGOs back to the 1970s when women’s organisations began to take an interest in policy issues. During that period Ghana was under a military regime, but there was also a proliferation of women’s NGOs that were small, focused, and working on a diverse range of issues on which they were highly effective.

Neoliberal economic austerity measures adopted under SAPs provided new sites of accumulation for State-friendly elites as well as alibis for increased violence against those opposed to the elites in power. Illegal privatisation of State instruments of violence and the rise of private groups to protect elite

political interests characterised the period (Katumanga 2010). In many contexts, neoliberalisation created conditions for authoritarianism and conservative public politics. It also fortified the link between militarism and gendered violence that has been well-theorised in the African feminist literature and social movements (Mama and Okazawa-Rey 2008), including due recognition to the reality that women also “contribute to the militarisation of society in both material and ideological terms” (Cock 1989: 50).

Lastly, alongside the strategic significance that violence takes in the contemporary subjective positioning of African women are debates on sexuality and heteronormativity which expose some contradictions in the African feminist project. Writings on queer African feminisms provide an important lens for viewing these contradictions, illuminating the religious and cultural underpinnings of homophobia, and exposing the conventions that link traditional institutions of marriage, rites of passage, and childbearing/rearing to normative sex and gender roles (Tamale 2013; Ekine & Abbas 2013). Furthermore, claiming queer positionalities within African feminism has also opened the possibility of challenging racist, anti-Black-women, homophobic, homonationalist, and colourist rhetoric that have nominally been concealed or marginalised by the universalising rhetoric of a “shared” social orientation among African women (Ossome 2020, 165).

Contemporary Social Movements and Struggles

A decolonial turn fundamentally defines the nature, strategies, and content of contemporary feminist struggles, especially among younger generation feminists. Weary from expending efforts on seemingly insurmountable challenges to the implementation of gender violence laws and policies, and recognising the limits of institutionalised responses to everyday forms of sexual and gendered violence, African women (and more broadly, women of the Global South) believe that any attempt to end violence must be conditioned upon anti-racist, anti-capitalist, decolonial struggles, and struggles against gender inequality. In this regard, Dieng (2023) highlights the resistance embedded in feminist acts of “*speaking up*... when only a few African women [a]re engaged in writing and publishing...[as] in fact articulating a pan-Africanist, anti-racist, and feminist manifesto against

dominant...discourses as well as (neo-)colonialist and hetero-sexist analyses on women's condition" (2023, 1; See also Abena Busia in conversation with Bernardine Evaristo in this Issue for an examination of a life devoted to resistance on the terrain of literature and the arts).

The stand taken by contemporary African feminist activists and movements goes distinctly beyond the liberal feminist mantra of inclusion, recognition, equality, and citizenship. For instance, within the emerging African feminist discourse and struggles around rape and gendered violence – embodied by student movements such as FeesMustFall and RhodesMustFall – the modes of activism are deeply articulated with a critique of ways in which Black women have been reconstituted in the postcolonial State as both already violated and as violable, the ways in which we experience the State as violent, and how the neoliberal State has tended to redirect injury through criminalising women's labour, dress, speech, and sexuality (Ossome 2020).

The tactics for organising among contemporary feminist movements include the formation of strategic alliances that signal a more concrete shift in addressing intersectionality as a postcolonial critique. For instance, as Xaba (2017) writes of the alliances and strategies that foreshadowed the FeesMustFall students' movement in South Africa, "[u]nder the ideological banners of Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black radical feminism, queer theories and decolonisation, students aligned with outsourced, exploited workers to challenge universities to end the outsourcing of workers, and demand free education and the decolonization of a Eurocentric higher education system" (96). Feminist leadership within FeesMustFall, in particular, was recognised, especially in relation to clarity regarding what feminist and decolonial comradeship ought or ought *not* to be, with many taking a critical stance against what sometimes emerged as a highly masculinised form of the resistance (Xaba 2017). From national struggles to decolonise higher education, to anti-rape organising, movements against police/State brutality, and internationalist solidarity movements such as those demanding the liberation of Palestine, a younger generation of feminist activists and scholars are showing remarkable clarity regarding the fundamental questions of their time and their historical role in confronting them.

Intergenerational, class, thematic and regional differences remain present among contemporary feminist movements and reflect diverse readings of the social imperatives driving feminist activism on the continent. For instance, in a recent study of post-revolutionary Sudan, SIHA (2021) showed nuanced differences between an older generation of rights activists and younger women advocating for human rights. These differences are most pronounced around issues, political approach, and ideology. The archiving of feminist activism, continuity, and memory emerge as distinct features of intergenerational dialogues, as do the issues being raised by different generations of feminists. In the Sudanese context, for example, women's positions at the time of the founding of the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) were conservative as the union focused on questions of education, political participation, equal pay for equal work, and labour rights (e.g., paid maternity leave and spousal transfer). Many of these struggles were directed towards the State and were linked with traditions and religion. The current issues in Sudanese youth activism have shifted the basis of claims from tradition to a (liberal) rights perspective (SIHA 2021).

Varying interpretations and expectations in women's movements also seem to amplify intergenerational tensions. In the South African context, for instance, Clark, Mafokoane and Nyathi (2019) illustrate this point with an incident that occurred during the #TotalShutdown intersectional womxn's march against gender-based violence in August 2018, when in response to the familiar call "*Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo*" (you strike a woman, you strike a rock), a group of young Black women responded in continuous chant in English, "We are not rocks!" (68). Reading this moment of challenge as a rupture, Clark, Mafokoane and Nyathi (2019), citing Matandela (2017), also see in the younger feminists' response a "recognition of an emergence of an emancipatory discourse that critiqued the political project of democratization that had not adequately addressed the substantive representation, leadership, safety and dignity of Black womxn and queer bodies" (68). Such tensions are not necessarily antagonistic to a shared desire for liberation across generations of feminists but rather may reflect an insistence that difference remains constitutive of our feminist struggles and movements. Naicker's account of the hashtag struggles (in this Issue), which references the use of the hashtag #mbokodo led by young women as

well as Omotoso and Faniyi's account of the #EndSARS struggles (in this Issue), suggests that both continuities and difference are constitutive of feminist struggles and movements.

The Common Themes of the Issue

FA 5.1's seven feature articles and other contributions (a conversation, a stand-point essay and two book reviews) discuss aspects of struggles and movements in Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan and the United Kingdom on a range of terrains of struggle: national, sub-national, in particular institutional locations, and in States and societies marked by over five decades of neoliberal economic and social policies and varying levels of political openness and democratic cultures. The feature articles examine struggles against dictatorship, bad governance, and economic crises; neoliberalism and privatisation; the exploitation of workers and their families; State-sanctioned corruption and violence, gender-based violence ignored by the State; expensive colonial education; the existential questions of making a living; and everyday resistance to oppression. The forms of struggle range from individual acts of agency and resistance, to local grassroots struggle, to dispersed and decentralised national and transnational movements. The contributions take up some of the themes and debates in the feminist literature that were flagged in the earlier sections of this editorial. We examine some of these briefly.

Neoliberalism at work

In recognition of the far-reaching effects of over five decades of economic globalisation and neo-liberalism on the terrain of resistance, a major theme in three of the feature articles is how neoliberalism has shaped the demands and divisions in Africa's feminist struggles and movements (Hassanain and Sidig in this Issue; Eddouada, in this Issue; Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa, in this Issue). Hassanain and Sidig's aptly titled essay "Bread or Representation" focuses on the limited emancipatory potential of representation politics when neoliberal policies create immiseration and render struggles for representation cosmetic and divisive. Middle-class women are pitted against their working-class

counterparts in contexts characterised by multi-faceted crises that arise from authoritarianism, corruption, and the failure of public spending.

Eddouada's article explores how women farmers rewrite a gendered land reform in Sidi Kacem, Morocco, by negotiating the women's rights rhetoric of international agencies with neo-liberal agendas such as land privatisation. She argues that while women's inclusion in the 2019 land tenure reforms was the outcome of women's struggles around collective land expropriation and privatisation, it was also informed by the need to comply with the Millenium Challenge Corporation's stipulation that the programme be gender-inclusive, the demands of the middle class-led Association of Women of Morocco, and the Moroccan State's gender policies. The result of this convergence, which provided moral support for extraction that benefitted urban capital at the expense of local peasants, is what she describes as "[forcing] an abstract, urban, middle class and Western feminist lexicon on working-class peasant women farmers' complex experiences of land and agrarian change." Not surprisingly, the reforms resurrected the tensions for women of having to choose between communal, rural peasant values and market-based bourgeois urban values. Eddouada concludes, quoting Rignall (2021), that while women might not have overtly opposed or resisted the pressure from global capitalism, they expressed their agency and reinvented the commons through their investment in the education of other women, their labour on family farms and cooperatives, and their contribution to family support and their children's education, actions that suggest that capitalism does not completely erase solidarity and reciprocity although it makes them less effective (Eddouada, in this Issue).

Similarly, the article by Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa on Ghana focuses on women's struggles against the privatised and extractive models of salt-mining in Ghana, while drawing attention to the Ghanaian State's use of a development discourse of modernisation and productivity to justify its support and protection of large-scale industrial salt mining accompanied by dispossession and enclosures of common property resources.

What makes struggles feminist

Several of the articles point to the challenges of distinguishing what is truly emancipatory from what props up the status quo and therefore cannot be characterised as a feminist struggle or movement. Eddouada uses the concept of governance feminism to frame her discussion of the relationship between corporate capitalism and feminism and to argue for a distinction, following Nancy Fraser, between global capitalist feminism and the feminism devoted to achieving true justice. Similarly, Hassanain and Sidig conclude that while the political representation agenda is not necessarily a problem, to be credible it must lead to economic rights that benefit all women. Therefore, by shelving economic justice demands and failing to take ethnic and class differences into account in decisions about movement priorities, the middle-class proponents of representation had missed an opportunity to make the women's movement more influential and relevant after the Sudanese revolution.

Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa on their part conclude that class differences among women in salt mining communities had become more evident as the privatisation of the commons evolved and different groups of women experienced the process in different ways. The ensuing protracted livelihood crises eroded women's shared gender identities as workers in a communal production system and fragmented their struggle for their livelihoods, upsetting their sense of how to reclaim the commons and who to ally with.

This issue also features in Naicker's argument that it is not simply how women define themselves, although that is important, but also how they identify, examine, and contest the gendered nature of their experiences as a basis of struggle against gendered power relations, that makes a struggle feminist. Thus, while women in the student movement were explicit in identifying their campaign as feminist, the women of Marikana, without using the language of feminism, raised similar issues of women's bodies - rape, trauma, abuse, bodily safety and access to reproductive health and services - thus demonstrating the error of separating such issues from politics.

Spatial and temporal continuities and discontinuities in feminist struggles

Several of the feature articles engage with the question of spatial and temporal continuities and solidarities in feminist struggles (Naicker, in this Issue; Ndakalako, in this Issue; Odoi and Baidoo, in this Issue; and Omotoso and Faniyi, in this Issue). Naicker's article examines the spatial and temporal continuities between South Africa's hashtag movements and earlier struggles of women against pass laws under apartheid, on the one hand, and those between the urban university-based hashtag movements and the struggles of working-class women of Marikana, on the other. In doing so, the article demonstrates that spatial differences and socio-economic and political specificities of the actors notwithstanding, all movements were within the same spectrum of contemporary feminist struggles. This is because women's common and differentiated experiences of patriarchal orders and gendered representational politics have been problematic even in domains of struggle considered popular or progressive. In Naicker's view, this is what led women to constitute themselves separately in both spaces, either through their hashtags or through the demands they made of university authorities, the owners of mines and male-dominated collectives for the redress of unequal gender power relations.

Omotoso and Faniyi also take up this issue by focusing on transgenerational continuities in Nigerian feminist activism as a strategy to transcend studies that focus on class, gender and generational divides, drawing on the work of Dieng (2023), in contrast with work that has emphasised the generational divides (Bawa 2018; Clarke, Mafokoane and Nyathi, 2018). In examining the #EndSARS activism as an aspect of transgenerational feminist struggles against State repression, they recall the traditions of struggle of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), under the leadership of Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, and draw attention to explicit connections that #EndSARS activists made between their struggles and those of the AWU. The article also draws attention to the activism of young urban multi-ethnic middle-class women and men as legitimate and beneficial as a feminist rallying force within the wider decentralised national movements against State authoritarianism. Rather than see the digital divide as separating this struggle from those of AWU in the 1940s and 1950s, the article identifies points of convergence and similarities in patterns of organisation,

conceptualised as an ethic of vigour born out of radical care. It is an ethic that uses strategies such as the persistent pursuit of specified goals, conscious networking across classes, a strong feminist identity, prioritising communications and the intentional documentation of the struggle through pamphlets and digital media; such strategies establish a continuum of women resisting oppressive structures across time (Omotoso and Faniyi, in this Issue).

While these accounts of the spatial and temporal continuities are compelling, we know from the literature that feminists of different generations operating within the same space and time have drawn attention to efforts to bridge inter-generational differences. This issue is explored in the essay by Odoi and Baidoo, which discusses the connections, commonalities, and differences between an older generation of feminist activists (operating between the 1980s and 2017) and digital feminist activists (working from 2017 to date), and the efforts to understand and bridge their expressed differences through dialogue. While acknowledging some differences in issues of focus and methods, the article concludes that digital feminism in Ghana is a continuation of older forms of organisation. The divide they highlight is the lack of inter-generational communication within contemporary feminist movements, a concern which African feminist movements, including the one under study, have made efforts to address through dialogue and representation. Their examination of a series of inter-generational dialogues found that while the older feminist movement included scholar-activists who played a pivotal role in the agenda setting and knowledge production for struggle, the younger generation did not reference that work and relied instead on the literature emanating from the global Black feminist movement (Odoi and Baidoo, in this Issue).

Ndakalako's account of the 2020 #ShutItAllDown protests by young women mostly under 25 years, which saw a demographic with little political influence and traditional cultural power take on the State to protest its inaction on gender-based violence, examines why older women and feminist activists with a long tradition of activism largely failed to support their movement – the one exception to this being Sister Namibia, that country's oldest feminist organisation. The essay concludes that while there is a generational divide in protest practices between contemporary protestors and feminist activists of previous generations, the acts of solidarity and collaboration between them and

Sister Namibia, facilitated by social media, speak to feminist solidarity practices that bridge the generational divides. However, Ndakalako's finding that the main value of the movement's strategic use of social media and disruptive protests was to give it visibility and link it to contemporary transnational and global hashtag movements, with which it had a clearer connection, is similar to Odoi and Baidoo's that younger feminists in Ghana draw inspiration from global feminist scholarship (Ndakalako, in this Issue; Odoi and Baidoo, in this Issue).

Questions of representation, multiple identities and vocalities

The four other contributions to the issue take up a common theme - representation and multiple identities and vocalities. Abena Busia's conversation with award-winning feminist writer Bernardine Evaristo draws attention to the importance of biographies of struggle to a fuller understanding of the makings of feminist leaders and their times. It also speaks to the act of writing as an indispensable instrument that can bear witness to struggles, to specific contributions of writer-activists to struggles around representation, and to polyvocality and consciousness. Both this lively and inspiring conversation between two leading feminist writers and literary scholars and Desiree Lewis' excellent review of Gertrude Fester's *Prison Notebook V2957/88* showcase the ways in which the struggle identities of remarkable leaders are forged in everyday lives of courage, endurance, and commitment to fighting the adversities of race and all other inequalities. At the same time, they speak to the power of feminist collectives and solidarity in the struggle against multiple and intersecting oppressions as well as the complicated politics of identities and representation.

The issue of representation is also raised, albeit in a different way, in Radwa Saad's reflections on the recent controversies about the depictions of Cleopatra in cinematic productions. This critique of both the racist tropes of Egyptian nationalist postures and strands of problematic Afrocentric interpretations of Egypt's Black heritage argues for a more nuanced understanding of race when navigating complex historical legacies. Saad's standpoint is an important contribution to wider debates about the legacies of slavery, colonisation and racism, Pan-Africanism, and the struggles against anti-Blackness in Africa and the African diaspora. Her conclusion that Africa is a mosaic of colours, cultures

and civilisations that ought to be celebrated equally is not likely to end the struggle between Afrocentricity and Egyptian nationalism about Egypt's Black heritage. However, her argument that we need to emphasise the common experiences of alienation and marginalisation of Arab Muslim and African American women, who are considered persons of ambiguous racial and ethnic identities, speaks directly to questions of intersectional oppressions and the global character of 21st century feminist struggles that feature prominently in this Issue.

Kamal's review of Rusha Latif's 2022 book, *Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution*, brings valuable insights from one of the remarkable struggles of the 21st century. The book debunks the idea that Tahrir is a spontaneous leaderless revolution of young, Westernised Egyptians deploying the power of social media, arguing that the uprising was a result of years of organising and protests by opposition parties and civil society in Egypt, which had leaders across ideological and class divides, whose achievements were due more to the power of Egyptian youth than the power of social media. This interrogation of the role of social media and the influence of struggles in the West against oppression is also taken up in the feature articles on feminist youth movements in Ghana, Namibia, and Nigeria (Odoi and Baidoo, in this Issue; Ndakalako, in this Issue; Omotoso and Faniyi, in this Issue). Kamal's review raises another salient question, namely the gender gap in women's representation and the gendered nature of leadership roles despite the equally substantial contributions of women to the struggle. Putting this in conversation with Naicker's account of the struggles for intersectionality in demands and representation of the women of Marikana and the hashtag movements at the university draws attention to how patriarchal leadership cultures permeate even the most progressive of spaces.

Conclusions

FA 5.1. sheds light on 21st century feminist struggles and movements in Africa, drawing attention to their rootedness in Africa's predicament as an adjunct in a global economic system of capitalist exploitation, the continuities, discontinuities and connections between African and global struggles for emancipation, and the inter-generational dynamics of struggles. In providing fresh empirical evidence supported by the existing literature, and in making efforts to theorise and reconceptualise feminist struggles in Africa, the Issue contributes to a more informed sense of the terrain of struggle and its exigencies. However, this is by no means the last word on this issue. That there is more research planned under this project on the histories of feminist struggles and on struggle biographies speaks to the ongoing character of knowledge production.

Related to this, certain movements and issues of struggle appear only tangentially in the case studies. One of these is the feminist movements' response to the rise of homophobic and transphobic violence and harassment on the ground and State actions that criminalise and expose LGBTQ persons and communities to attacks amidst the growing influence of foreign evangelical forces who have exported American and European cultural wars to Africa. Sections of Africa's feminist movements have either integrated this issue into their work or engaged in acts of solidarity with LGBTQ struggles, although this is not a uniformly positive development. Several of the features in this Issue, particularly those focused on the #hashtag struggles (Ndakalako; Naicker; and Odoi and Baidoo) raise this issue as part of the process of identifying the membership and concerns of younger feminist movements. However, it deserves fuller consideration given its topicality and the ways in which it exposes a particularly virulent form of homophobic gender backlash that threatens fundamentally the gains of Africa's feminist and gender justice movements.

Furthermore, certain themes that were raised in the contributions require more systematic research. These include the role of Africa's postcolonial patriarchal States which perpetrate and stabilise the conditions of gender oppression through their actions and inactions. In this connection, several articles have discussed the African State's use and misuse of its monopoly on legitimised violence (Omotoso and Faniyi, in this Issue), the disciplining and ideological roles

of sections of the State apparatus and the question of feminist governmentality (Naicker, in this Issue; Eddouada, in this Issue), the State's neglect of gender oppression (Ndakalako, in this Issue) and its collusion with capital, traditional leadership and conservative forces to depoliticise, delegitimize and demobilise feminist struggles and sustain gendered systems of oppression (Naicker, in this Issue; Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa, in this Issue; Eddouada, in this Issue; Abdelazzin and Sidig, in this Issue).

While it was evident that the research underpinning this issue was concerned with feminist principles for ethical research, there has not been a sustained effort to fully examine methodological questions and their implications in the feature articles. The space restrictions of feature articles make this a difficult proposition. However, what is presented in the articles does provide a basis for addressing and documenting questions of methodology. For example, an issue which was addressed in some detail in the essays was the positionality of the researchers. Odoi and Baidoo identify as part of the young feminists in Ghana whose politics and practices they were studying. Similarly, Kamal's (in this Issue) review of Rusha Latif's 2022 book, *Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution* notes that the author starts with her own experiences in Tahrir, providing a "detailed, first-hand eye-witness mapping of the location, slogans, chants and 'the Rules of the Square', thus situating the author as a reliable participant observer in the research project." Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa argue that feminist research requires multiple methodological approaches embedded in reflexivity and participation, which represents a double conscientisation in which researchers and their target groups share ideas, strategies, and tools (Torvikey, Gyapong and Adomaa, in this Issue).

Grey material, whether online or in print, as well as public statements, press releases and other relevant documents, constituted a particularly important source of information for the study on Sudan. This was no different for the Ghana studies and the hashtag struggles of Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa. In this connection, the significance of online spaces as sites of research on contemporary movements is important. This is because such movements, particularly the hashtag struggles, have been extensively documented on social media platforms and in interviews on YouTube and podcasts, according to Ndakalako (in this Issue). The value of digital archives for documenting the

histories of feminist movements, even those that have not traditionally relied on digital spaces, cannot be underestimated. All these questions of positionality, ethics, methods and instruments as well as theorising, when considered in relation to the subject matter and subjects of research, will contribute to the quest for epistemic justice and the strengthening of feminist research cultures, issues long championed by *FA*.

As a model of how African feminist knowledge can be produced, disseminated, and used, the research project underpinning this Issue has potential and possibilities for replication. We are hopeful that the emergent Pan-African community of scholarship will grow beyond the research and catalyse even more such communities that teach us about the changing terrains, formations, and politics of feminist struggles of the 21st century while contributing to *FA*'s project of epistemic justice.

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Notes

1. We are grateful to Charmaine Pereira who served as supervising editor; to Akosua Darkwah, Desiree Lewis, and Samuel Ntewusu, resource persons at the first in-person project workshop; and to the anonymous reviewers of feature articles for their invaluable contributions to the Issue.
2. Aisha Yesufu was a prominent leader of the #EndSARS campaign of 2020, while Alaa Salah was the woman in a white toub addressing rallies during the Sudanese revolution of 2019.
3. The call received 23 submissions from across Africa. Feminist Africa Research Projects are an important instrument of inter-generational Pan-African collaboration and learning which provide the space for addressing urgent questions that support feminist struggles for Africa's emancipation from neo-colonial underdevelopment and epistemic injustice. The research project format is to provide space and time for empirical research, theorising, reflection, and skills-building workshops and writing to sustain the interest and commitment of a new generation of scholars to producing rigorous scholarship for FA and other journals.
4. Eddouada (in this issue) argues that it might appear to be anti-feminist to choose group rights over individual rights and autonomy; women's calculations about not risking the clear benefits of solidarity and reciprocity for the uncertain gains of individualised land interests cannot be dismissed. This points to the complexity in the determination of what is feminist.
5. The conversation was organised as a session of the 3rd Kwame Nkrumah Festival, the first to be fully digital, which was curated by the 4th holder of the Kwame Nkrumah Chair in African Studies at the University of Ghana, Amina Mama on the theme "*Pan Africanism, Feminism, and the Next Generation: Liberating the Cultural Economy.*"
6. An example of such an approach is "An Archive of Activism: Gender and Public History in Postcolonial Ghana", led by Kate Skinner and Akosua Adomako-Ampofo, which has interviewed women activists; collected photographs, footage and memorabilia; and produced a documentary film. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/dasa/research/archive-of-activism>

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Gendered Boundaries: Feminist Politics and Popular Struggles in South Africa

Camalita Naicker

Abstract

Events in the last decade of contemporary South African history have ruptured the normalised regime of politics on the mines and in the universities. These events began with the Marikana strikes in 2012 and South Africa's hashtag movements - #rhodesmustfall, #feesmustfall, #RURReferencelist, (and relatedly #metoo). The rejection of representative forms of politics signalled by the direct action of workers at Marikana and students in universities seemed to suggest that institutionalised structures, i.e., the trade union and student representative councils, were not capable of articulating political concerns on the ground. I am interested in how, in the absence of these organised political forms at Marikana and during #feesmustfall, women suddenly appeared visible on the frontlines of these struggles in these spaces. More specifically, I am interested in how such an appearance of women was accompanied by discourses that challenged dominant representations of popular politics in the public domain. At Marikana, Sikhala Sonke's claim to be "The women of Marikana" foregrounded the gendered dimensions of a struggle that until that point had focused exclusively on striking male mineworkers who had occupied a mountain. During #feesmustfall, women held placards that read "#imbokodolead" and "this struggle will be intersectional, or it will be nothing," claiming a central role for women and gender in the student protests. Through women's discursive practice, the space of the mine and the university seemed to *become* gendered in ways that made prior representational focus on wages, fees, class, and race, through representative bodies appear suddenly narrow and limited.

Although these events occurred in very different spaces with different socio-economic and political actors, this article attempts to consider women's movements in Marikana, #RURReferencelist and relatedly, #metoo, as part of the same spectrum of contemporary feminist struggles. I argue that their

commonality lies in how these events exposed the naturalised patriarchal order of things, reviving historical feminist debates about the gendered boundaries of representative forms of politics. Focusing on women's critiques of institutional and popular forms of politics in universities and the mines, the article responds to the question of why women constitute themselves as separate collectives, even within those domains of struggle considered popular or subaltern. However, whilst young women's interventions in student politics in the university have been publicly claimed as explicitly feminist, this article focuses on research conducted in the shack settlement called *Nkaneng* in Marikana in order to read women's struggles within such a space as part of the same spectrum of feminist politics in contemporary South Africa. This is done by demonstrating how women's everyday life in the shack settlement emerges as a fundamentally gendered experience that shapes the issues around which women make a set of political claims, constitute themselves as separate collectives, and illuminate their critique of gendered power relations within institutionalised and popular politics.

The article begins by providing a brief history of women's experiences with institutionalised politics in South Africa in order to situate contemporary struggles within such a historical trajectory. The next section provides a brief overview of women's collective interventions in the university highlighting their feminist critiques of the gendered boundaries of the political. Finally, the article focuses on women's struggles in *Nkaneng*, revealing how their everyday lived experience in the shack settlement informs their need for separate spaces where women address unequal gendered power relations. This provides an insight into how women's collective struggles are shaped and conditioned by the political economy of space.

The Social Location of Black Women in Colonial, Apartheid, and Post-apartheid South Africa

Understanding how and why women's appearance at the forefront of contemporary popular struggles seemed both sudden and novel requires us to think about these struggles as part of a history of women's experiences with institutional politics within the broader political economy of South Africa. From the late 1800s, imperial capital and colonial segregationist governmental policies

shaped black women's social locations in South African society in specific ways. Under colonial rule, black women could not exercise public political power through voting until 1994. Yet, in the early parts of the century, a restricted number of educated and propertied black males could vote, and white women were enfranchised from 1930. Whilst this may seem an obvious point, it is also a significant one. Marxist-feminists have illustrated how contemporary forms of liberal representative politics such as the franchise were coterminous with European industrial modernity and informed a patriarchal re-ordering of the social. The male industrial wage, the gendered public-private dichotomy, and women's violent social transition from collective labour in the commons to individual workers in the home all marked the emergence of industrial euro-modernity (Federici 2004; Mies 2014). The patriarchal form of the nuclear family minimised women's individual and collective political and social power while women's unwaged social reproductive labour subsidised capital. In South Africa, the gendered re-ordering of the social and the enclosure of the commons occurred through violent colonial conquest of land, forcing African people into reserves. In this context, local understanding of gender and sex had to contend with European impositions of such notions.

After the 1860s, the political economy of southern Africa was defined by the discovery of minerals and the use of migrant labour in an industrialising imperial economy in a white settler society. Under indirect rule, new forms of African patriarchy assisted in the release and administration of male migrant labour whilst confining women to the reserves. African men became new fiscal subjects of the colonial state, paying colonial taxes and performing waged labour while African women performed unwaged agricultural labour in rural reserves and were made the juridical juniors of male chiefs, headmen, fathers, husbands, and sons (Mamdani 1996; Guy 2018). Under colonial rule, the rural and urban became an imagined and real gendered separation between male waged work in the urban areas and women's social reproductive labour in the rural areas. This process intensified under apartheid; as the state increased and extended patriarchal controls, notably through the Bantu Authorities Act in 1951, women's pass laws in 1956, and forced removals from the 1960s, intended to keep African women and children out of the white city and within new homelands.

Black women's exclusion from representative politics and industrial labour impacted the form and content of black organised politics as practised in the political party and the trade union, after Union in 1910. New African nationalist organisations, including the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later ANC), were influenced by the euro-modern gendered public and private divide and fashioned in the image of Westminster parliamentary politics. Therefore, while the SANNC could accommodate male *Iinkosi* in the Upper House of the party, women only gained formal membership in the 1940s (Ginwala 1990). Despite notable exceptions, the masculinisation of waged work informed male-dominated trade union movements and their focus on the mediation of wages. Women did however informally and formally participate in these organisations, challenging gendered power relations, but such challenges did not find easy translation into organisational discourses and practices. By the 1950s, Lilian Ngoyi's infamous words, "the husbands speak about democracy in the street, but they do not practice it in the home," (Berger, 2007: 196) exemplified women's contradictory political experiences in the first half of the century. This public-private dichotomy continued to inform the struggles of women unionists later in the century (Mashinini 1989). From the 1970s, young women increasingly challenged issues around sexual autonomy, care work and military work in exiled ANC camps, making important inroads (Hassim 2006). On the one hand, their challenges to patriarchal organisational practices were often subverted in the name of unity, the creation of separate women's structures, or developmental discourses right up to the early 1990s (ANC National Conference proceedings, 1991). On the other hand, women's achievements were visibilised in the new constitution which significantly focused on inclusive rights for women and targeted discrimination based on sex and gender. Even so, from 2001 the reinvigoration of traditional authorities threatened to reinscribe gender boundaries and patriarchal authority (Ainslie and Kepe 2016).

That black women were historically positioned at a particular conjunction of South African political economy has meant they have had to navigate the afterlives of this history in practice and discourse. In fact, black women most often do not appear in those histories that we might consider nationalist or labour historiography. This is not to say women do not appear in history at all or that there is not a significant and growing literature to this effect. Rather, even as

women's political activities have been retrieved and documented, they do not often find easy categorical gestation in mainstream nationalist or labour historiography. Instead, such histories are often additive and represented as so-called women's history. Significantly, this has also occurred in feminist literature where the category women's history has functioned to exclude women from explicit inclusion in the category of feminist history. This is precisely because the issues around which women have struggled have often occurred at the margins of nationalist, class-based, and white feminist discourses.

Post-apartheid South Africa opened a space for more explicit feminist writing agendas and debates around what constitutes feminist critique and struggle. This has been informed by a long history of how black women had to negotiate conflicting demands and loyalties. On the one hand, black women had to contend with masculinist nationalist struggles which emphasised race; on the other hand, white feminism often ignored the complexities of intersections between race and gender (Wicomb 1996, 51). The latter often attempted to draw a boundary around explicitly feminist actions and those that involved notions of womanism, motherhood, or the home (Gasa 2007). This ignored how black women's precarious social locations under apartheid turned the notions of home, motherhood, and the family into "constructs characterised by desire," (Wicomb 1996, 49), constituting a specific political domain for black African women. Further, attempts to delineate the political boundaries of feminism often relied on the deployment of particular bounded discourses on class and feminism which subvert and silence black feminist voices and the critiques they raise about nationalist politics and academic theorising (Lewis 1996).

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing debates that I locate my discussion of contemporary feminist struggles and the possibility of reading seemingly disconnected events on mines and universities together in ways that can acknowledge difference whilst raising points of convergence. This may complicate approaches that seek to narrowly focus only on two important differences that one might raise between women's struggles in the university and on the mines. The first could be class difference; while mines are historically associated with the production of an exploited black and largely male working class, the university is associated with the production of a historically white male middle class. The second difference is that while women in the student movement

specifically claimed a feminist narrative for student struggles, women in the mines articulated their struggles around a range of issues that did not explicitly include feminist language. Thinking about mines and universities as part of the same disciplinary regime of imperial patriarchal power may allow us to think across women's struggles at the centre and women at the margins as part of the same spectrum of feminist struggles that began to claim public political power in the post-apartheid period. This may also help to account for how and why #RURReferencelist and Sikhala Sonke emerged from within the domain of popular politics, providing insight into how women continue to negotiate the afterlives of patriarchal state institutions and organised forms of politics on material and discursive grounds.

#mustfall Movements and the Gendered Boundaries of the Political

I begin with a discussion of black women's struggles in the student movement in order to highlight points of commonality that I wish to explore in my discussion of women's movements in Marikana. The connection between mining capital, colonial governance, and the establishment of historically white universities in South Africa, notably the University of Cape Town (UCT), Rhodes University and the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) is well established. Less discussed, however, is how racially segregated universities were informed by the public/private dichotomy and characterised by a male-dominated student body for a large part of the twentieth century. Even as black African women entered mission schools, women's seminaries, and later Bantu education institutions in the early parts of the century, they continued to be targets of policies around social reproductive labour which channelled women into professions like teaching, nursing, and health care work (Unterhalter 1990). As such, the settler colonial state did not just seek to confine the majority of black women to rural reproductive labour but also extended such forms of labour into formal schooling and education available to a small but growing number of black women. Such feminisation of education allowed some black women new avenues of economic and social power, but this was made possible through racist and sexist policies (Healy-Clancy 2014). This contradiction informed the institutional culture of

educational institutions where racism, violence, and sexual abuse were both widespread and largely ignored (Unterhalter 1990). From the 1980s, black and female students slowly entered historically white universities in larger numbers. However, between 2005 and 2017, black students became the majority at all universities, including all but one historically white university (Essop, 2020). At the same time, these universities remained white and male-dominated spaces both in terms of leadership, academic staff, and curriculum. These became central issues expressed in contemporary student protests.

From mid-2015, predominantly black students at the University of Cape Town bypassed their Student Representative Council (SRC), dominated by university branches of national party politics, and embarked on direct strikes calling for the decolonisation of university curriculum, staff, and campus culture. Termed *#RhodesMustFall*, the protests directly referenced the connection between Cecil John Rhodes, an imperial mining capitalist, and the university. The protests spread and evolved into *#feesmustfall* and *#endoutsourcing* campaigns, bringing demands for equity in higher education and increasing neoliberalisation of the university, long raised at former black universities, into former white universities across the country. As SRCs momentarily faded into the background of direct action, young black women led and participated in protests in large numbers. Students referenced women's pass marches in 1956 and introduced explicitly feminist and scholarly terms, notably intersectionality, on placards and in struggles.

But by November 2015, the student movement began to fracture along gender lines when the hashtag *#RapeAtAzania* visibilised the rape of a female student at the student occupation of a university building at UCT (Bernado 2015). Women who raised concerns about sexual harassment and assault were reportedly told by male students "not to cause divisions among their comrades" (Mugo 2015). These threats were followed by physical violence. In April 2016, when an activist tried to raise the issue of sexual violence during a protest, she was physically assaulted by male comrades (Isaacs 2016). A few weeks later, a group of young female students at Rhodes University took direct action to highlight how due process had failed young women who tried to report sexual

abuse. Against the procedural structures of the university, the women released a list on social media naming their sexual abusers. #RURReferencelist sparked protests at Rhodes and campuses around the country, involving many women who had been part of #feesmustfall (Robertson 2016). On the 19th of April, hundreds of young women staged a nude protest at Rhodes, drawing attention to how the feminised body and its associated performance was over-burdened in the space through which it moved, making visible the gendered power dynamics of the university. The protests culminated in a group of women retrieving three males from their residences and detaining one, who was a member of the SRC (Solomon 2017). #RURReferencelist was the first time the university was shut down over sexual violence in South Africa and university management called police onto campus who arrested and charged the women. Two of them were banned from the university for life. Yet, as the name suggests, #RURReferencelist did not evolve into a #mustfall movement. Rather, Yolanda Dyantyi, in a YouTube video (Archive Amabali Wethu 2021) called #RURReference list “the debris of #FMF,” positioning it as something excessive, outside the student movement.

Already from October 2015, hashtags like #patriarchymustfall and interventions by the trans collective at UCT began to call attention to the erasure of women’s participation in #feesmustfall that was underway. Activists argued the patriarchal attitude of male students towards female leadership *and* media coverage focused only on male leaders; *both* reproduced the image of popular protest as a male domain (Pilane 2015; Omar 2016). Therefore, women of #feesmustfall and #RURReferencelist have deliberately made attempts to archive their experiences against the possibility of erasure and individualisation of women’s participation (see for example Archive Amabali Wethu; Ndlelu et al., 2017).

Significant for this article is how through archiving their experiences the activists draw attention to the invisibilisation of women’s work in the fallist movement on the one hand and the masculinisation of protest politics on the other. Hlengwe Ndlovu (2017, 71) outlined how raising bail money, sourcing legal aid for arrested students, organising food donations, and running media and logistics teams counted as women’s “behind the scenes” work in the fallist movement. Ndlovu (2017, 76) argues that this was “womxn’s hidden work that is never celebrated or made into headlines.” Rather, the media’s focus elided the way in which the picket line “is a contested space that privileges masculinity while

womxn's bodies are often objectified, denying the hard work that is undertaken every day in building the movement" (Ndlovu 2017, 69). The women linked their hidden work to the objectification of their bodies and male dominance in student organisations, and later to the student movement, illustrating how these were all mechanisms of policing the political domain. Amanda Mavuso (2017) illustrates how young men at the Tshwane University of Technology actively policed entry points into politics, arguing it was reminiscent of protest politics that unfolded at her home on the outskirts of uMkhondo in Mpumalanga province. In both spaces, protest politics was considered "the job of men" and the mere appearance of her feminised body at protests turned her political participation into an 'invitation' to ridicule, abuse, and rape (Mavuso 2017, 6). The women viewed the university's decision to call police and private security onto campuses during protests, where police shot and tear-gassed students in general, as part of an already existing context of women's experiences of institutional and popular politics. For Xaba (2017, 101), "militarised masculinities" and militarised campuses transformed women from political protestors in resistance to feminised bodies and targets of sexual harassment by police, private security, and male comrades.

These experiences explain why women made deliberate inventions to shape and change patriarchal media narratives, creating WhatsApp groups and hashtags, co-ordinating sartorial choices, using particular images, and staging direct interventions to centre women and claim political space (Dlakavu 2017). Nude protests became a way of "reasserting the presence and impact of womxn's bodies on the picket line" during #feesmustfall, obstructing various patriarchal gazes even as womxn's bodies continued to be objectified (Ndlovu 2017, 71). Through such interventions, women called attention to how both university administration and male comrades actively attempted to sweep sexual violence under the rug. Ragi Bashonga and Zuziwe Khuzwayo (2017) illustrate how, despite the growing numbers of women at former white universities like Rhodes, Wits, and UCT, sexual harassment policies remained largely procedural, inert, and ineffectual in confronting sexual violence on campuses. This informed why #RURReferencelist and the grapevine became a tool of feminist solidarity. Like their Indian counterparts, who released #Losha a few months later, gossip became a way to protect other women by sharing information otherwise subjected

to legal discourses of *reasonable* doubt which conversely protected men from accountability (Morais dos Santos Bruss 2019).

The women specific gendered experiences of #feesmustfall tell us why they had to constitute separate collectives within the student movement, and how they used social media, grapevines, nude protests, and archives, to challenge through an explicitly feminist lens dominant narratives that portray protests as male-led and fee-centred. The women's critiques illustrate how binary-gender narratives functioned to feminise particular activities and particular bodies, locating them outside the domain of the political. Significantly, their stories demonstrate how such boundaries are policed through various actions and inactions of male comrades, university administration, police, private security, and media, whose practices overlapped and reinforced each other. This informed women's gendered experience of protests and reinscribed already existing and normalised gendered power relations within the space of the university. It is based on such gendered boundaries of the political that I draw connections between women's struggles on the mines and in the universities. The rest of this article considers a set of questions stimulated by these events through a specific focus on contemporary events in Nkaneng at Marikana. By examining how successfully women are able to express their political concerns through institutional forms of politics, I show how the institutional is constitutive of a specific gendered experience of the everyday that conditions and shapes the terrain of feminist struggle in the space of Nkaneng shack settlement.

The Women of Nkaneng Shack Settlement in Marikana

Shack settlements on platinum mines are largely a post-apartheid phenomenon. Under colonialism and apartheid, mines were predominantly masculine spaces made up of large male migrant workforces housed in single-sex mining hostels. From 1986, as pass laws were lifted, families of mineworkers and various work seekers slowly began to move to the mines. Rather than housing, mining companies offered an insignificant living out allowance to mineworkers who elected to move from single-sex hostels to outside accommodation. Lack of employee housing and low wages account for the emergence of shack settlements and their physical location adjacent to mines, providing proximity to the workplace

and mine services such as transport to shafts and mine clinics. However, shack settlements changed the demography of the mines in significant ways. Today, Nkaneng shack settlement is home to a mixed population of several thousand men, women, and children, the majority of whom are Sesotho and isiXhosa speaking people who have lived in the area for more than twenty years. Yet, despite such changes, literature on mines remained largely focused on men, trade unions, and labour issues until August 2012.

In 2012, male mineworkers embarked on strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in the North-West Province of South Africa, bypassing their trade union, occupying a nearby mountain, setting up a worker collective and formulating their own wage demand. On August 16, 34 mineworkers were gunned down by police in events referred to as the Marikana massacre. During the strikes and amid the quick disintegration of the representative of striking workers, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), a vibrant, audible, and autonomous women's movement emerged. Sikhala Sonke was formed during the strikes by women living in the Nkaneng shack settlement. While men were on the mountain, women worked behind the scenes, organising food donations, staging marches against police brutality, and supporting strikers' demands for higher wages. They received widespread media attention (Naicker 2016). Sikhala Sonke used public platforms to raise issues around housing, services, and safety, and drew attention to unwaged social reproductive labour, illustrated by a placard that read, "Lonmin, what do you want with our husbands?" A labour strike became about not only wages, collective bargaining structures, and mines as places of industrial production but also about the intimate life of mineworkers and the domestic space in which it unfolded, challenging the long-projected image of the mines as a purely masculine space.

In 2012, I met Nomzekhelo Sonti and Thumeka Magwangqana, instrumental in the formation of Sikhala Sonke. At the time, they shared a close friendship and were both unmarried women in their forties whose financial relationship to the mine was not directly related to men. Sikhala Sonke became involved in local community structures and creating economic activities for women, including communally planting vegetables and maize; keeping cattle, goats, or chickens; fostering financial practices like stokvels; selling waste materials

from the mines; and carrying out social activities like rape-counselling and theatre (Naicker 2016; 2020). The women's ability to build separate and collective domains of power in their society allowed them to engage in institutionalised politics and find individual and collective fulfilment.

After the massacre, the collapse of ruling-party-aligned NUM opened a space for new institutional political challenges. Inspired by the potency of the worker strikes and the women's movement, a new national political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, emerged and was launched at Marikana in October 2013. Sikhala Sonke was instrumental in EFF electoral campaigns and victory in local government elections at Marikana in 2016 (see Sargas 2014). According to Thumeka, Sikhala Sonke campaigned for the EFF because men often excluded women from participating in community politics (Naicker 2020). The EFF became a major political role player in the area, and unlike what pertained in other branches, there was a "solid representation of women" who performed much of the administrative and recruiting work at Marikana (Essop 2015, 229). Additionally, Nomzekhelo was invited to become an EFF member of parliament. However, rather than dealing with specific issues around which women had built their political power, the party discourse to nationalise the mines continued to be structured around mainstream political economy and militarised culture in the party (Magadla 2013). Such issues were soon visibilised in the women's movement which experienced strain over its relationship to the party, and when the EFF lost the last municipal ward elections in Marikana, new women's collectives emerged. The next sections seek to provide insights into this process by illuminating the persistence of certain conditions under which women's separate collectives emerge. I utilise older research on Sikhala Sonke, together with new interviews with members of Sinethemba, a new women's movement formed in 2017, which forms part of over ten years of continued research.

The Gendered Terrain of Popular Politics

In July 2022, I met, shared a meal, and had a collective conversation with six women in Nkaneng in the zinc structure which hosts the church they attend. The women were all members of Sinethemba and were between the ages of 36

and 60. The majority were unmarried, and all participants either lived or had lived in Nkaneng and its surrounding areas for periods ranging from five to 20 years. The interviewees included Thumeka, who was instrumental in starting Sinethemba and part of the women who left Sikhala Sonke. My conversation with the women illustrates how the lived space of the settlement and the institutional authorities operating within it produce a specifically gendered experience of everyday life for women in Nkaneng.

The material life of Nkaneng shack settlement is constituted by hundreds of zinc shacks of varying sizes which function as private residences, shops, shebeens, churches, meeting places, and other communal spaces. There is no sufficient access to water, sanitation, electricity, or roads. Rudimentary communal services are offered, including a few taps, pit toilets, and high mast lighting, shared amongst the several thousand residents. I summarise how this infrastructural regime informed specific material and gendered power relations on the ground by focusing on three major issues, discussed in parts in other studies (see Fakier and Cock 2009; Benya 2015; Naicker 2018; Oldfield et al. 2019). The first issue concerned women's reproductive health. The lack of proper access to sanitation and water mediated women's bodily experiences like menstruation whilst women juxtaposed the cost of sanitary pads and scarcity of birth control pills with the ubiquitous availability of free condoms. The latter, already a site of negotiation between women and men, was seen as a deliberate decision made by mine clinics, and supported by trade unions, to privilege male bodily experiences over women's reproductive health. A second set of issues pertained to women's sensory and bodily experiences of safety, informed by lack of access to sanitation and electricity, and provision of only rudimentary high-mast stadium-type lighting common in South African shack settlements. The lights which illuminate some parts of the muddy, uneven roads and cast large shadows on other parts, together with communal toilets, turn something as routine as using the bathroom at night into a life-threatening experience for women. Within such a context, the lack of policing facilities also acquired gendered significations. Lastly, such issues collectively entailed high material costs for women due to the settlement's physical location. Women often paid up to R650 in transport fees to travel to neighbouring towns to purchase sanitary pads or access services like *free* birth control or abortions at State clinics, with no guarantee that such products and

services would be available on their arrival. The same costly journeys ensued when women had to report rape, sexual assault, or domestic abuse at the closest police station. Issues concerning water, electricity, roads, transport, healthcare, and geographical location therefore ceased to be an inert reality for women. Rather, they conditioned women's everyday material and sensory experiences, politicising their bodies as they negotiated the lived space of the settlement, and informing what constituted urgent political concerns for women. This requires them to navigate a specific political configuration of power with the mining company, traditional authorities, and trade unions, who collectively constitute a major part of the political terrain in Marikana.

The refusal of mining companies to provide higher wages or housing to their employees makes capital central to the physical and political organisation of the space of the settlement. The platinum mine, now owned by Sibanye Stillwater, and Nkaneng are located on land under the jurisdiction of the Bapo baMogale, Tswana Traditional Authority. As such, on the one hand, the traditional authority grants mining rights to Sibanye who in turn pays them royalties, making the Bapo baMogale the business partner of Sibanye. On the other hand, however, the Bapo baMogale are also the local governmental authority which mediates social responsibility labour plans between Sibanye and mining beneficiary communities. That many residents of Nkaneng do not share an ethnicity with the traditional authority and are often considered non-local, puts a strain on the idea of a beneficiary community. This, in part, explains why the National Union of Mineworkers, as a non-ethnically circumscribed representative, occupied such an important position as a political role-player mediating the relationship between workers and the mine until 2012. After the massacre, the majority of the mine workforce joined the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Workers Union (AMCU), which now occupies a similar position as the NUM. The women's attempts to raise their concerns through an already complex political configuration are further strained by the historical constitution of this arena of political power as masculinist and male-dominated, which structures their contradictory relationship to the institutional.

Many women's relationship to mining capital is indirect and mediated through the male wage which in turn structures their intimate relationships with men. Asanda Benya (2015) outlines how men's work organised the material and

social fabric of many women's everyday activities such as cooking, cleaning, and eating times and affective work on the mines. For other women, the male wage informs certain transactional and intimate economies of discipline and affection, where men "look at us like we are pieces of meat and say, "listen to us, we buy your beers." As such, the materiality of many women's lives continued to be informed by the male gaze derived from the power of the male wage and relatedly the devaluation of women's unpaid work. This directly and indirectly informs women's relationships to union politics. The historically narrow focus of unions on wages and the workplace, the latter often excluding issues like maternity leave or sexual harassment, has direct effects on women who have begun to work underground. Because men see underground work as a male space, women are often subject to ridicule, abuse, or hostility (Benya 2013). Such gendered discursive limitations likewise inform how male union members police the boundaries of inclusion in a general political domain. For example, Thumeka complained that women often supported men's struggles, whilst men were single-minded about issues they deemed political, such as wages, union politics, or security, often excluding women from their meetings. Moreover, even when issues such as security were raised, the reference was often to the safety of property rather than women. This informed women's need to create their own solidarity networks and framed their demands on local authorities, such as the establishment of a satellite police station. Yet to make such a demand, women had to navigate not only an ethnically circumscribed traditional authority but also an authority made up of "old men who do not understand the struggles of the girl child" and who "do not listen."

Yet, even when the police were accessible, their behaviour towards women who reported gender-based violence was a far cry from their assumed social role of ensuring safety. Gabisile noted, "When women are raped, and they go the police – they will traumatise you. They will tell you not to bath, they will ask you what you were wearing, where are you, what were you doing – they actually try to blame you."

The women illustrate how what constitutes the political for women and men was shaped by their relationship to various institutions. Women's daily experiences are shaped by capital, State institutions, and organised politics, leading to gendered impacts on their relationships with friends, husbands, fathers,

and sons. This political economy of space shaped the gendered terrain of struggle, informing how “woman” emerged as an ideological category, organising women’s collective practices in Marikana. As such, despite their split from Sikhala Sonke, Sinethemba continues to be involved in similar activities.

The Politics of being a Woman in Nkaneng, Marikana

At Marikana, women’s organisational practices respond to their specific social locations and it is not coincidental that most Sinethemba women are within the 36 to 59 age group. Women in this age group trying to escape reliance on male wages, abusive marriages and relationships, or seeking autonomy, fall outside government-defined categories of youth and pensioner. For Thumeka, the use of “women and youth” together as vulnerable persons obscures the reality that “most development opportunities are directed at youth, cutting older women out of possibilities of better livelihoods.” Sinethemba provides opportunities for women seeking to eke out a living from economic activities like communal gardens or acquiring skills in sewing and other crafts. However, it also provides a space of support and refuge for older women subjected to specific gendered practices of State and family institutions. For example, Sinethemba recently assisted a woman in her late forties, fleeing an abusive marriage together with her child, by offering financial and emotional support unavailable elsewhere. Lizeka Booi described how such support was unavailable for many women in their natal homes,

[women]...have to feel grateful to have a man, then they are taken seriously. If you get divorced and you go home, they actually have a name for us, they call us return soldiers. Sometimes you will have to eat separately or even with the children.

The needs of its membership therefore inform the activities of Sinethemba as well as its feminist practices. For Thumeka, Sinethemba was not just about social and economic needs but also about providing “a space where women can have a voice.” Rather than a unified or singular idea of voice, the space facilitates discussion, debate, and disagreement, where women collectively make sense of individual gendered experiences. This was specifically evident during discussions regarding abuse and counselling. For example, one woman

said women needed to be tough about abuse, because men were facing other struggles and needed love and understanding. But Gabisile challenged her, arguing that “to love [men] is not enough to change them because they often abuse those they love.” Most of the women, however, agreed that men were often the subjects of abuse by other men but did not report it because they felt ashamed and were “afraid of the laughter of police”, other men, and their wives. The same issues emerged regarding counselling. Thumeka and Gabisile who are trained trauma counsellors juxtaposed their experiences of men’s silence during counselling sessions with their experiences of community meetings where men dominated in numbers and talk time. Because most counsellors were women and the majority of participants in individual and group counselling were also women, men often did not seek counselling despite the availability of a few male counsellors. Here too, as with reporting abuse, the threat of ridicule conditioned how counselling was regarded by men as feminine social behaviour. Although experientially different, women illustrated how forms of patriarchy functioning on rigid gender binaries subjectified both women and men, leading them to question and debate the constructed nature of gender and the making of both women and men. Having a separate space provided relief and solidarity, both material and discursive, allowing them to build and claim alternative public power and collective identity as the women of Marikana. However, this paradoxically conditioned their inclusion into institutional and organised politics.

Minding the Gender Gap

As with Sikahla Sonke’s experience with the EFF, Sinethemba women are now publicly recognised and regularly invited to attend events on mining, development, and rights. Significantly, Sibanye often extends invites to Sinethemba to attend stakeholder meetings. However, this invitation is often premised on the assumption that the women appear as a recognised community representative who can merely ‘endorse’ social responsiveness plans. According to Gabisile,

Sibanye just wants ‘yes’ people but as soon as people say ‘no’, they exclude you from meetings; as soon as they know the community is not happy, they move the meeting from Rustenburg to Johannesburg or Cape Town.

This attempt to manufacture consent is linked to specific bureaucratic modes of representative politics which rely on a translation of the political into corporate social responsibility. That women as a collective can be invited to give input into social and community services separate from wages, for example, isolates certain issues into a domain where women can supposedly have a voice. It illustrates how corporations benefit from the gendered boundaries of the political, using it as a mode of depoliticisation. The latter obscures how issues about housing, social services, and wages all form part of a system of economic production premised on material deprivation and cannot be so easily separated. In this way, identity-based rights politics can chime in with official bureaucratic attempts to subvert popular demands and power, allowing the institutional to recover the gap opened by feminist struggles.

For this reason, disagreements about how to make political demands can and do lead to division amongst residents, including women's organisations, because the material stakes for residents are high whilst corporate social responsibility plans are designed to thwart material demands and keep social investment low. Moreover, whilst Sibanye refuses to provide decent housing for its workforce, the eliding of gender and the domestic space in trade union discourses can coincide with the patriarchal logic of capital. For example, Thumeka juxtaposed how AMCU members in Marikana might exclude women from community meetings, but when AMCU held big public rallies or events in the area, Sikhala Sonke and Sinthemba were invited in an organisational capacity, because it was important to have *women's* "public" support. This is women's contradictory experience with institutional politics. Their gendered experiences often necessitate convening their own spaces outside these forms of politics, allowing them to claim public political power as women, but once this occurs, they may find their engagement with institutional politics confined to specific domains. This feminisation of a range of socio-economic issues contributes to maintaining the patriarchal order of things. When women take action and make demands to expand the political category, they reveal how patriarchal power structures function to maintain the lack of investment in the social sphere by capital in the neoliberal political regime, which has consequences both inside and outside of mining spaces.

Conclusion

This article read contemporary political subjectivities of black women in #feesmustfall and Marikana as part of a long history of black women's experiences with institutional and organised forms of politics produced within the broader history of the political economy of South Africa. I have illustrated how women's struggles in Marikana can be seen as continuous with those in the university by illustrating how women in both spaces critique the masculinisation and the policing of politics as a male domain. That women in Sikhala Sonke, Sinethemba, #feesmustfall and #RURReferencelist constituted themselves as separate collectives, therefore, alerted us to gendered power relations even within those struggles considered popular or subaltern. In both spaces, women's bodies became central to such gendered politics which invisibilised the work that women contribute to political organising. Against such an erasure, women's struggles visibilise a set of socio-economic issues that relate to body politics: rape, trauma, abuse, bodily safety, and access to reproductive health and services, revealing what is at stake in the separation of these issues from the political.

As such, rather than simply thinking about women at the margins of political structures, these events illustrate that it might be more productive to think about how their experiences with the institutional can structure their social location and shape their subjectivity as women. By considering struggles at the margins and the centre together, we gain an insight into how patriarchy as a dominant and hegemonic form of power informs certain configurations of patriarchal power that work together to produce and subjectify women in general *and* differentiated ways. These connections can call into question the boundary between what are considered explicitly feminist struggles and those that languish in the domain of women's politics. Informed by their bodily and material experiences, women's collectives are produced through the patriarchal logic of the institutional and organised domains of politics, which often determine when, where, and how women can find political expression through forms of representative politics and modes of organisation. Rather than absence, the article illustrates how the feminisation of these issues during normal times enables the masculinisation of politics and women's exclusion from the political even as they continue to be present. I have argued that what makes these struggles feminist

is not how the women define themselves, although this too may be present, but how they actively identify, examine, and contest the gendered nature of their experiences. These struggles open a space for thinking about feminism not as purely identitarian politics but as the basis on which to critique gendered power relations in society and make visible the normalisation of white, capitalist, and patriarchal gazes.

Notes

1. Sikhala Sonke means “We cry together” in isiXhosa and is the name of the women’s movement discussed later in this article.
2. “Imbokodo” means rock in isiXhosa and is related to the slogan that symbolises the women’s anti-pass march of 1956, “Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo” (You strike the women, you strike the rock).
3. In the Cape Colony, African men could vote until 1936 and coloured men 1951, dependent on passing “a civilizational test”, which included, property, income, and level of education thresholds.
4. The South African Native National Congress, the African People’s Organisation, the All-Africa Convention, and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses did not have women members in the first half of the twentieth century.
5. Sometimes translated to mean African chieftaincy or traditional leaders including royal houses.
6. For example, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union which organised both women and slum dwellers (see Bradford, 1988).
7. In July 1991, at the first African National Conference held after the ANC’s unbanning in South Africa, women’s demands for 50/50 representation on the NEC threatened to split the congress, causing Nelson Mandela to intervene and appeal for unity.
8. Note: the term women is intended to include transgender women in these remarks; however, as mentioned below, there was also a separate trans collective at UCT which also raised specific critiques about the erasure of their participation in RMF.
9. The two students were excluded from the universities and charged with kidnapping and assault amongst other charges (Solomon 2017).
10. In 2017, third-year student Yolanda Dyantyi was charged with kidnapping, assault, insubordination, and defamation and given a lifetime ban from Rhodes University. After almost six years, Dyantyi’s appeal was upheld by the Supreme Court on the 29th of March 2022.
11. Nkaneng meaning “by force” or “with force” in Sesotho; and Inkanini in isiXhosa meaning stubborn determination, or resilience.
12. Sikhala Sonke means “We cry together” in isiXhosa.

13. Their friendship forms the narrative arc of the film about Sikhala Sonke, *Strike a Rock*, 2014 by Aliko Saragas-Georgiou.
14. Nomzekhelo previously had a surface job on the mine and was medically boarded off and Thumeka worked in a local store and lived with her daughter who had a job on the mine.
15. Members contribute fixed sums of money to a central fund at decided-upon intervals of time and receive the money, usually annually, on a rotational basis.
16. In a Cape Town shack settlement in 2016, a woman was raped and murdered on her way to the bathroom at night, precisely because of such everyday material conditions. (C Naicker. Research notes, January 2016).
17. Khanyile, Gabisile. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
18. Khanyile, Gabisile. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
19. Khanyile, Gabisile. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
20. Magwangqana, Thumeka. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
21. Boo, Lizeka. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
22. Magwangqana, Thumeka. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
23. Khanyile, Gabisile. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.
24. After the massacre, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) began to offer trauma counselling workshops and training in Marikana.
25. All the women interviewed attended the group sessions.
26. Khanyile, Gabisile. Interview by Author. Notes. Nkaneng, 11 July 2022.

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Gabisile Khanyile, 11 July 2022, Nkaneng, Marikana.

Lizeka Booï, 11 July 2022, Nkaneng, Marikana.

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Thumeka Magwangqana, 11 July 2022, Nkaneng, Marikana.

Blessing Mani Ntonti, 11 July 2022, Nkaneng, Marikana.

Wango! Women's Struggles Amidst Privatised and Extractive Models of Salt Mining in Ghana

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the contestations and struggles of women salt miners in Ghana within the context of the increasing privatisation of commons and enclosures. Using a qualitative approach based on both desk reviews and primary data sources, we situate the study within the changing models and scales of salt production along Ghana's eastern coast as driven by development rhetoric. While the State continues to use a development discourse framed around modernisation and productivity to provide an impetus for such enclosures, the mechanism through which benefits should materialise remains highly contested among different classes and groups of women and between women, the State, traditional authorities and the private sector. We argue that the women's demand for access to the lagoons and salt fields and sustainable mining practices typifies feminist struggles worldwide against capital and patriarchy. The study also shows that the evolution and class character of the struggles are connected to the divisive roles that the State and traditional authorities have played in the communities. We conclude that the fragmentation of the grassroots women's organisations results from the strategies deployed by the agents of capital and their neoliberal institutions.

Keywords: Rural livelihoods, commons, women, salt mining, privatisation

Introduction

Ghana's annual salt production potential, estimated at 2.2 million metric tonnes (Ghana Export Promotion Council 2009), is about eight times more than current production. The production potential is at the centre of the national discourse on salt production, which revolves around its under-exploitation and the need for modern, capital-intensive extractive production models. Although often purported to incorporate different producers in the spectrum, including artisanal small-scale miners (ASM), the vision to modernise the sector is framed in the logic of large-scale industrial production (Third World Network, 2017). In the past two decades, the State began to take a more uncompromising stance against ASM, primarily women, in the Keta and Songor Lagoon areas, the largest salt-producing areas along Ghana's eastern coast. While the State has neglected the infrastructure and policies necessary to support community-driven and sustainable salt-winning and mining, it has taken pragmatic steps that have undermined the existing practices in the salt-mining communities.

In 2011, the government of Ghana granted a total lease of 49,421.1 acres to three large-scale companies to undertake salt mining in the Keta Lagoon area. In this paper, we focus on women's struggles against the 7,299.41 acre concession originally granted to West African Goldfields Limited, which transferred its rights to Kensington Salt Industries, now Seven Seas Salt Limited (Atta-Quayson and Baidoo 2020). We also analyse the 15-year concession lease of 39,126.66 acres, the largest of its kind in West Africa, to Electrochem Ghana Limited (EGL) in the Ada-Songor Lagoon area, granted in October 2020. The lease grants and their fallouts have culminated in the current conjuncture where dispossession, disruption of economic activities, and repression of democratic processes amidst the crisis of social reproduction have ushered women to the forefront of the struggles in the salt-mining areas. As Ossome (2021) argues, women's quest to control their means of production and for greater autonomy has placed them at the centre of these struggles and in the domains of social, political, and economic oppression. Organised mobilisation by women salt winners in the two major salt-producing areas is new (Keta-Adina, post-2010) and old (Ada-Songor, since the 1970s). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the nature of the current struggles and the collective framing of the demands about capitalism,

feminism, and development. This paper reflects on how feminist concerns drive the struggles, shape their form, and determine their character and demands.

The history of struggles around access to land, salt, and water along Ghana's coast dates back to pre-colonial times. However, men dominated the leadership of the mobilisation (Manuh, 1994). The crises spanning the later stage of the 20th Century to the new millennium presented challenges in neoliberal democracy, which centres development on market-driven narratives while repressing community voices. Thus, violence and repression of people have become a part of the neoliberal democracy. Another significant characteristic of the time was the legitimisation of extractivism through state machinery and policies. Salt, hitherto the most feminised mineral in Ghana, has come under cycles of crises emanating from State policies and development failures. While the nature of the extractive sector is usually context-specific, some commonalities are inherent in all forms. As noted by Pereira and Tsikata, these include "the appropriation of land to extract natural resources, the dislocation of communities, widening social and economic inequalities, increasing use of violence to repress resistance, and the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity" (2021, 16). The factors that trigger violent clashes, such as dispossession, livelihood disruption, and human rights abuses linked to environmental degradation and social dislocation, intersect with patriarchy to affect women in particular ways. Hence, women's struggles against extractivism in their communities are linked to current multifaceted feminist struggles of socio-economic rights, social reproduction, and environmental justice.

To articulate the intersections of power, class, and resources in extractivist-related struggles, we used feminist political economy perspectives as an analytical lens to explain the women's and communities' struggles in the salt mining areas of Ada Songor and Adina in Ghana. In our analysis, the State occupies a critical space due to its complex role as an enabler and mediator in the salt sector. Atta-Quayson (2023) has laid out the relationship between the State, customary authority and corporate interests in salt mining. The author details how a segment of the customary authority that had earlier opposed industrial takeovers in the salt sector has gradually accepted that production model and its citizens' dispossession. The implications of the shifts in customary authorities' endorsement of industrial mining and dispossession are in opposition

to citizens' struggles for community ownership of the resource. As Chomsky (1999) argues, in the neoliberal development paradigm, States enact laws and regulations that promote profit over people and quicken profit maximisation and accumulation, no matter the cost. Ghana's salt sector policy directions and change have echoed this perspective. We analyse the women's struggles against dispossession, livelihood disruption and human rights abuses vis-a-vis the shifting positions of the State and its intricate relations with chiefs and corporate interests. We discuss the feminist mobilisations in the Ada-Songor and Keta-Adina lagoon areas and the emerging class contradictions they evoke.

In the remainder of this paper, we first reflect on our methodological approach, after which we contextualise women's current struggle in the context of changing State policies and associated shifts in production models. Next, we present the intricacies of women's everyday struggles, highlighting their demands and strategies. We then present the outcomes of these struggles on the women's front and conclude with a reflection on how they speak to women's struggles in the 21st Century.

Researching Feminist Struggles: Methodology and Positionality

Researching feminist struggles and collective actions requires multiple methodological approaches embedded in reflexivity and participation. Hence, a dual conscientisation where the researchers and the target groups share ideas, strategies, and tools is critical (Mies and Shiva 1993). In the spirit of scholar-activism, we engage this research from a critical standpoint following the experiences of women who experience oppression (Mama 2011). Women have been mobilising and continue to take collective and individual actions to confront extractive capitalism. Their struggles are manifold and located across multiple sites of power. Therefore, we adopted research approaches that enabled us to get to women, whether in or outside movements. We interacted with women and the leadership of women in a female-only group in the Ada Songor area, namely Ada Songor Salt Women's Association (ASSWA), commonly known as *Yihi* Katseme [brave women]. Furthermore, we interacted with women in other community-based groups, such as the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF),

Ada Songor Lagoon Association (ASLA), and women who participated in sporadic protests in the Adina area without such organised mobilisations.

We used a mix of qualitative research methods in this study. In Songor, the over 20 communities along the lagoon are all sites of resistance, of which we selected five for our data collection. In Keta, we selected Adina, the community that remains the critical site of resistance, for our data collection. We, therefore, conducted more interviews in Songor than in Keta. We carried out six key informant interviews in Songor and two in Adina. We also conducted 20 in-depth interviews in Songor and six in Adina. We had five Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions in Songor and two in Adina. At Ada Songor, we participated in a meeting of a newly formed community group, Ada Songor Lagoon Association (ASLA), and had one-on-one conversations with a few members. In January 2023, at Kasseh, a town in the Ada East District, NETRIGHT, a women's organisation championing economic justice in Ghana, organised a town hall meeting and a research dissemination activity with cross-generational participation. We used the opportunity to interact with the participants to get their perspectives on the emerging issues about the concession grant to EGL. At Adina, we also visited abandoned community salt fields. The study also relied on secondary documents with important information on the cases we studied. Examples include national legislation and policies, company business plans, government speeches, news items, and documentary films on salt production and struggles.

A Historical Overview of Salt Sector Policy and Production Shifts in Ghana

Women's current struggles in the Ada-Songor and Keta-Adina lagoon areas are rooted in policy shifts in the salt sector. We link these policy shifts to the changing production models to emphasise the State's instrumental role in transforming the sector and the scapegoating of ASM. Traditionally, salt in Ghana is produced as a shared resource governed by customary practices and driven mainly by indigenous knowledge, skills and technologies. Women were central to salt mining and trade, producing autonomously and controlling their income (ASAF 2016). The turning point for community lagoon and salt governance systems came when Ghana, drawing from provisions of the United Nations, nationalised

mineral resources and vested them in the hands of the State. The State's vesting of natural resources is closely linked to people's right to self-determination and economic development. At the same time, States must have powers derived from their constitutions to regulate investment standards to protect people, the environment, human rights, and other public interests (Dagbanja 2022). Ghana's Minerals Act, Act 126 (1962) was passed almost immediately, which, in principle, changed the community resource access and ownership in favour of the State. However, some mineral resources continued to be managed by local people. For instance, the State focused on precious minerals such as gold, manganese, bauxite, and diamond. Thus, despite the law establishing a mineral licensing regime, salt-producing communities continued to win salt based on customary practices and norms. Subsequently, mineral laws have seen several revisions and changes. The state's power remains, while industrial minerals such as salt have gained renewed interest (see Ghana's Minerals and Mining laws 1986; 2006; 2019).

It is essential to take a step back to understand the circumstances undergirding the shifts in developments around salt and the critical role of the State. In 1965, the construction of the Akosombo hydroelectric dam, an ambitious State project, restricted the cyclical water flow into the Songor Lagoon, which affected salt mining and started a long spell of livelihood crises and ecological impacts (Tsikata 2006; Amate 1999; Miescher 2021). These crises compelled the chiefs from land-owning clans to welcome Vacuum Salt Limited (VSL) in 1971 to establish and use its "superior" technology to restore the lagoon to enable small-scale mining. However, the company reneged on its promise and began gradually dispossessing small-scale miners, resulting in violent community clashes. Within ten years, the State cancelled the VSL concession and all other leases to industrial companies. The State, however, excluded the sacred Yomo Lagoon from its control and nationalised the entire Ada Songor Lagoon. Following the killing of Margaret Kuwornu, a pregnant woman, by stray State bullets on May 17th, 1985 (see Ada Salt Cooperative, 1989), the State set up the Justice Amissah Commission of Enquiry in the same year to investigate the tensions in the area concerning the salt and the lagoon. In 1989, the State consulted a Cuban Technical Team, ECIMACT, to study the salt sector. ECIMACT produced a very elaborate *Master Plan for Salt Production in Ghana* in 1991, which the State

approved for implementation. The Master Plan recommended, among other things, technological solutions to restore the flow of water into the lagoon and common brine and space sharing to accommodate various types of production. The State had the sole responsibility for implementing the recommendations. In furtherance of the Plan, the State enacted the Ada-Songor Lagoon (Site for Salt Industry) (Vesting) Law, 1992 (PNDC Law 287). The State, however, reneged on its responsibilities to implement the Master Plan, and this would have long-term implications for the livelihoods and development of salt mining communities along the coast. In the Adina area in the Keta Lagoon catchment, the total erasure of women and communities in salt mining commenced around 2011.

Since the early 2000s, in line with Ghana's neoliberal development shift, the State's vision for the salt sector has been industrialised and modernised large-scale production. This is characteristic of the several policies formulated at the time, such as the Land Use Plan (LUP) for the Ada Songor Lagoon Area (2007), the Minerals and Mining Act, 2006 (Act 703), the Strategy for Ghana's Salt Sector (2009), the Minerals and Mining Policy of Ghana (November 2014) and the Mineral and Mining (Amendment) Act, 2019 (Act 995) which provided an enabling environment for the private sector. By enforcing policies that entrust natural resources to it, the State gave out thousands of hectares in concession to private companies in the Keta and Songor lagoon areas. Consequently, violent clashes continued to erupt in these areas following the State's entrenched role in problematic concession grants that violated the socio-economic and cultural rights of the communities (Atta-Quayson and Baidoo 2020).

We characterise the primary shifts in the salt sector in three main conjunctures. The first is the community-driven lagoon and salt governance and mining practices anchored in access to the commons. Women's role in the salt sector and their place in their communities and families was highly recognised. The second conjuncture is the "nationalisation" push, which entrenched the invisible hands of the State in the salt sector. This period has varied forms of contradictions with ramifications for livelihoods. This phase also began the erosion of community management practices while entrenching the power of a segment of the traditional authority over the resource. Thus, over time, the supportive mineral legislation criminalised traditional salt mining. The third conjuncture is the privatisation

phase, which took root during the nationalisation period. In the Ada Songor area, the failure of the State to implement the Master Plan and the suspicion that the State could covet the resource fuelled a new locally driven privatised model of mining: *atsiakpo* (private saltpan balkanisation practices). The *atsiakpo* owners, mainly local elites, some members of the traditional authority and wealthy urban dwellers occupied the lagoon and lands by creating embankments in which they pumped water to produce salt. This model concentrated salt mining in the hands of a few men and relied on access to capital for heavy machinery and technology, such as excavators, water pumps, generators, and trampolines, which many ordinary women could not afford. All these culminated in women mobilising to demand the restoration of salt- and lagoon-driven livelihoods from the State and other institutions.

The Current Struggles of the Women Salt Miners

The Ada and Adina areas have been built on ancient practices of artisanal salt mining, reflecting communal values and identity. For many women, salt is all they know, as participants in the focus group discussion sessions emphasised. In Ada, collective salt mining has defined this socio-economic activity for many decades. “Songor for all”, the Ada Songor Salt Women’s Association (ASSWA) slogan, encapsulates their desire to return to the past practice of collective community ownership, which recognised and protected women’s community membership. The framing of the salt and lagoon as common resources meant less pressure for the contradictions and differences of gender to emerge as a distinctive question. (Ní Chléirigh 2019). Nonetheless, following years of privatisation, state interventions, corporate development, and *atsiakpo*, the natural and cultural landscape of a once collective and open resource has been drastically modified (Langdon 2020; Langdon and Garbary 2017).

Until the EGL takeover of the Ada Songor Lagoon, the *atsiakpo* system dominated. Its owners are a mix of men, women, financiers, licensed firms, private individuals, local groups, and people who have strong alliances with influential traditional authorities, the capital to acquire modern equipment, and the ability to hire labour for salt production. With the EGL takeover, the labour of the majority of women whose salt livelihoods depended on a common lagoon

and brine have become alienated from the resources. Many women have lost their productive autonomy. Those incorporated as labourers - fetching water, gathering harvested salt from pans to stockpile areas, and packing salt in refineries - work under exploitative conditions. FGD participants at Matseko described the period as difficult for women who earned just about GHS1 per basin of salt gathered, which, until 2012, was 30 pesewas. Respondents indicated that, on average, women labourers earned about GHS20 (USD 1.7) daily, which can barely sustain them and their households. One woman reiterated:

We need help to win salt on our own. The younger ones cannot go to school. We educated our children well when we won our own salt. However, with *atsiakpo*, we worked and earned GHS10 a day. How much will be left for the child to send to school? .

Further, the rigid nature of the *atsiakpo* model neither coheres with their reproductive responsibilities nor makes room for family support, as was the case in the past. The women complained that even women *atsiakpo* owners preferred male labourers. There were accounts of verbal abuse of female labourers linked to the difficulties in meeting their daily targets. To many, the *atsiakpo* undermines intergenerational structures by favouring the strong, vibrant, and capacitated. Widely held cultural and family values are not reflected in the work environment. For instance, many community members condemned the practice of older adults working for younger *atsiakpo* owners, as bitterly expressed by a woman in Ada during an FGD, "how can a young girl or boy ask her or his mother's age mate to become a labourer for him or her?" The situation has thus created intra-family and community conflicts.

The *atsiakpo*, akin to the petty bourgeoisie as Karl Marx conceptualized, represents a system of production that has both capitalist and working-class inclinations but also blurred interests regarding their social situation. The *atsiakpo* complicates the ongoing discourses and struggles concerning the takeover by EGL. Prior to the takeover by EGL, chiefs were noted to have granted *atsiakpo* leases to non-indigenes on a relatively more extensive scale than was done for community members. The granting of leases to non-indigenes resulted in agitations and clashes between traditional authorities and the local people. In Lolonya, for instance, some members of the customary authority, with the backing of non-indigenous *atsiakpo* owners, funded police-protected counterclashes

against the people to quash any resistance. This has created a dent in the relations between the different groups of women and segments of the traditional authority. Over time, resistance to *atsiakpo* withered, and many opponents later joined in to create their salt pans to sustain their livelihoods.

In Adina, salt mining was based on inherited salt-winning spaces— more of a family commons. Before the new ownership structure, the salt-gathering technology, which was based on a natural crystallisation process, enabled salt winning without limitations to space. Repeated use of the same space came with new mining technologies, which required investment in salt pans by individuals and families amidst the lack of State infrastructure. Akin to family commons for farming based on usufruct rights (See Gyapong 2021), developed salt pans are passed on to generations and are conventionally not marketised or leased to others. Children could win salt on the fields of their mothers and grandmothers. However, the parts of the fields that were not constructed with cement remained community commons. We did not receive any reports of internal dispossession prior to the concession grant, in contrast to Songor, where *atsiakpo* embankments preceded the most significant industrial concession grant. The current struggles in Adina are directly linked to the rupture caused by industrial mining and the extractive model of operation, which primarily affected the community lands. A woman expressed in an FGD session the community's relationship with the resource before the takeover:

That concession is a community land for us. God has made the lagoon and salt available to us as our gold. The Akan people have gold and cocoa. We, too, have the lagoon, land, and salt as our cocoa. However, the government has taken it away from us. We are suffering as a result.

The primary struggle for women is against the enclosure of the commons and its impact on their livelihoods. However, the struggles are also anchored in the ecological effects of large-scale industrial salt mining. Successive governments have premised their modernisation discourse on a counter-narrative that artisanal salt mining, and by extension, women's mining methods, destroys the environment. Women, however, contest this narrative; one of them quizzed, "*A grader machine and a hoe, which will destroy the environment faster?*" Women's struggles are, therefore, intended to counter this narrative and instead highlight the ecological effects of industrial mining on the lagoon and its interlinked

natural resources and livelihoods. In both study areas, women contend that their traditional methods of salt production are guided by the generational benefits of the commons, which is environmentally sustainable. They contend that using small tools causes minimal disturbance to the lagoon landscape (Coumo 2005). The women also highlighted changes to the lagoons' ecology and the persistent flooding from industrial salt mining. Flooding affects downstream communities and the lagoon's salinity, thus harming aquatic life. In Adina, the company was mandated to leave a buffer for community salt production. The land was strategic only for mining, but women used the drier space to dry anchovies. Anchovy processing and marketing are major economic activities for women in the area. Despite the importance of salt-winning and anchovy processing to women, the company's activities disrupted both livelihoods. In Ada, extractive mining has increased the lagoon's salinity, thereby reducing stocks of fish species such as *hawii* (water crabs), *peniku* (small tilapia), *abor/abordu* (shrimps), and *kpotoe* (mudfish). The women's struggles are rooted in the inseparability of land, lagoon, fish, and salt, anchored in the rippling effects of the changing lagoon ecology and landscape on other natural resources and associated livelihoods.

In both cases, the women and affected communities were not adequately involved in the decision-making regarding the takeovers. The community engagements were not transparent. Chomsky (1999) argues that consent in the global neoliberal regime is manufactured, and where it fails, States resort to violence and lethal force to enforce it. In Ada, there is disregard for socio-cultural beliefs and reverence for the lagoon as a deity. Women's struggles and demands manifest in economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions and represent a longing to return to the Master Plan and its vesting law. The Master Plan gives credence to the centrality of micro and small-scale artisanal salt mining and outlines strategies for protecting the ecology of the lagoons and other associated resources. The Plan epitomises the women's demand and envisions salt and other related activities as crucial to a more integrated and sustainable sector.

Mobilising to Reclaim the Commons: Women's Strategies in the Struggles

Women groups in Adina and the Songor area used various means to invite the State to negotiate. When that failed, they deployed confrontational strategies to push back against their dispossession. It is important to emphasise that while there is a commonality in women's experiences of dispossession, those in the Ada Songor area have had a more extended history of struggles in the salt sector. This has shaped their resistance strategies and made them more grounded in the long term. While we did not find women's struggles in the Adina area before the 2000s, we found that women mobilised and engaged in actions deemed "unruly" for women and organically linked to their roles in their communities.

In Ada, Naa Yomo, a female deity, is credited as the spiritual foundation for the Ada traditional area, Songor lagoon and the salt (see Amate 2017). Naa Yomo guided customary practices linked to the lagoon and the salt. This history evokes the cultural importance of women's position in salt winning in the communities. Also, the memory of the killing of Margaret Kuwornu on May 17th, 1985, is often evoked to mobilise women to be part of struggles around sustainable salt mining. In 2016, ASSWA adopted the "*Songor for All*" manifesto, which reiterated Songor's history as a shared resource. ASSWA used the manifesto to advocate for the communities. The women used Radio Ada, a community radio station, as a hub for their dissemination and strategies. They also protested and held press conferences to continue their advocacy. For example, in 2016, ASSWA wrote letters to the police service informing the security outfit about their impending demonstration to amplify their discontent with the State's neglect of the development of the salt sector. This plan to protest followed various advocacy activities in communities to support the restoration of the Songor Lagoon as a common resource for women and the local people. The police, however, denied ASSWA the right to protest, citing the imminent national elections and associated security risks. The mobilisation reached a crescendo on October 12th 2016, when the women held events simultaneously at Sege, the Ada East District capital and in the national capital, Accra. Those at Sege marched through the streets, accompanied by a band, and holding placards to convey varied messages. The following were some of the messages displayed on the placards,

“Salt is our life.”

“Songor Salt is wealth of the Adas.”

“Women salt winners are sinking.”

“Our livelihoods as salt winners are at stake. Women and children!!!”

“Master Plan, White Elephant. Dollars Wasted 26 years now!!!”

“Traditional Council, Wake Up, Songor is being Destroyed.”

“Songor, Wor kulaa wano: Yihi Katseme!!”

“Songor Salt Development: Local Content.”

“Poverty at Songor Area due to salt importation.”

The ASSWA members who travelled to Accra held a press conference and petitioned the President and prospective government officials to attend to the salt sector by implementing the Master Plan. A key leader of the ASSWA recounted the moment and its success:

We used one stone to get two things. We were smart. When the Police Commander saw us, he realised they could not dissuade us. The police escorted us, protected us, danced with us and then we presented our petition containing our alternative ideas to the District Chief Executive and the presidency. The demonstration happened in Ada and Sege. However, we sent copies of our petition to the DCE, Member of Parliament, Minister of Trade, Minister of Lands and Natural Resources and the presidency.

The women localised international bills of rights to make demands on the State. They petitioned the State to adhere to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which urges States to respect the rights of indigenous people to self-determination and to prevent forceful dispossession of their lands and natural resources, among others (see UNDRIP declaration 2007).

Adina and its surrounding communities have no history of salt-related confrontations; thus, they have no known grassroots movements. However, they rose to the occasion when they saw their livelihoods threatened by the concession grant to industrial miners. As part of their mobilisation strategies, women defied threats from the State, the traditional leadership, and the company against people who mine in the concession. They were emboldened to mobilise and demand

the return of the salt mining concessions to the community. A pivotal moment in their struggles was their occupation of the salt mining field at Adina as an act of defiance and to draw attention to the structural injustice that confronted them. One of the leaders of this singular event narrated what happened at the time,

We, the women, mobilised ourselves; we were more than fifty, women only. We were in clothes, and we wrapped *danger* (red pieces of cloth) on our heads to signify the seriousness of the problem. We were shouting as we marched ourselves to the concession. We started winning salt when we got there. We had our baskets and pans. We went there, and the company called the police, saying we were destroying their property.

We women had only our mining tools- pans and baskets. We were only singing and shouting to attract attention. We called on the government to reverse the concession grant and see that the lease to the company was a mistake. We invited the whole country to see what was happening in the community. We were hungry and angry!

The women stood their ground and refused to move when confronted by about 20 police officers. One of the leaders, a relative of the community chief, received a call from him, pleading with her to ask the group to leave the concession. When she remained adamant, he told her, *“If you continue to occupy the concession and the police shoot you, you would have died a foolish death because you would have brought it on yourself”*.

Another member of the group, frustrated, told the research team,

A gun is a gun. I will not fear it. I then went to stand in front of the police with my hands in the air. I asked them to shoot me. They were silent. I said if killing me will bring an end to the occupation of our salt field by these foreigners, then shoot me. Perhaps my death would give freedom and justice to other women, the community, and future generations. So, I said, shoot me! However, they did not shoot. I saw that one by one, they laid down their guns.

The police withdrew and started negotiating with the women. The women rejected their offers, labelling them as short-sighted, tokenistic, and not liberating enough. When the police commander offered to give them money for food so that they could vacate the concession, the women replied,

We do not want your money. Our source of livelihood for food and care for our children is lost. That is all we want back. We want the salt field back! The sea has flooded our community and destroyed our livelihoods. The sea displaced us, and these foreigners are also destroying the lagoon. Where do you want us to go?

While attacks on women in communities experiencing extractive activities are also linked to women's deviation from gender norms, in the case of the Adina women, aware of how power works, they overturned the structure and decided that men should not follow them, thus demonstrating that they could construct their resistance path. They were fully aware that if men followed them, the police would attack them, so their strategy was a calculated act to forestall the police brutality but also to centre women's economic autonomy independently of men. The women also argued that they have better negotiating skills to engage with police, hence there was less likelihood of their being shot.

When the women realised that none of the forms of protest yielded any result, they threatened to go on a naked protest - the highest form of female anger and bodily insurgency. They did not carry out this threat, but it would have been severe, as reported by a local government official. By threatening naked protest - resistance through the evocation of disrobing - the women knew that culturally, such acts exert pressure on patriarchy to act. Diabate (2020) has shown that the threat of naked protest and the act of executing it have increased in Africa and are linked to women's discontent with many things. Women have used naked protests as a feminist tool to defy norms governing society and decency and to expose in public spaces parts of the body deemed private (Young 2020). In many societies, it is a cultural taboo for women, particularly mothers, to show nakedness in public. Such naked protests defying taboos resonate with women all over the continent at the frontlines of mobilisations against all forms of violence, including environmental, social, socio-economic, political and gender-based. It shows the commonalities in the experiences and struggles of past and present generations of women, particularly in Africa, and their resistance to socio-economic oppression. As Mathebula (2022,1) notes, "...naked protest is a powerful form of protest that transforms a woman's body from social constructions of vulnerability and consumption to a site of militancy, defiance and one that speaks back from a position of solidarity and strength." One of the

leading figures in ASSWA who supports Adina women with information and strategy recalled the events:

In the Adina area, the women marched into the concession together, and the company invited the police to be deployed from Ho, Tema and Aflao. The women wanted to strip naked, and because of that, the police did not shoot them. Were they men, the police would have shot at them, and blood would have [been] spilt.

Tamale (2017) has reiterated the underlying power of women's naked protest in African societies, which is deemed a "curse" on whoever has incurred their wrath. The threat of a naked protest, thus, is intended to cause discomfort to patriarchy and not soothe it. While the women did not strip naked, one of the leaders demonstrated to the research team how she held her breasts and jiggled them in front of the police commander and his team and told them that "*these [breasts] fed you!*" This is another form of humiliation to the police, which disarmed them subsequently. As Lewis (2009) has argued, public spectacles, which include enlistment of the body, evoke struggles beyond formal politics. Naked protests are subversive acts that show resistance to oppressive regimes.

The Changing Models of Production and the Tensions within the Women's Front

The shifts in production models in the salt sector in Ada Songor and Adina have significant trajectories linked to the way feminist struggles have to be conceptualised. Women everywhere are not a homogenous group; gender intersects with status and class differentiation. In the salt-producing areas, the dispossession deepened social differentiation when the commons became threatened, leading to disparities in relation to how women are incorporated in the changing salt economy. This is particularly evident in Ada, where the changing models of production have had different livelihood effects for different categories of women.

When salt was produced as a common good, it was based on exchange and collective labour. The women talked about how they held hands walking in the muddy salt fields to protect themselves from slipping. They also helped each other carry the salt and worked close to each other on the fields. Salt winning was less individualistic. The community observed cultural practices that prohibited

people from winning salt during certain months until rituals were performed to announce the beginning of the season. Those practices were linked to a moral economy of sustainable salt winning. For instance, access to the Ada Songor Lagoon was sometimes closed for three years.

The corporate takeover has brought women together to resist the State's effort to deprive them of autonomous production. However, the years following the failed promise of the Master Plan ushered in the development of the *atsiakpo* system. The privatisation of the commons through the creation of embankments and dykes and the deployment of heavy machines created local opportunities for accumulation, which excluded some women and benefitted those with the requisite resources. The incorporation of resource-endowed women into the new stage of mining is a fallout from the long spell of livelihood crises and the State's resolve in the 2000s to displace locals by the introduction of industrial mining. From this period, the class differentiation among women became sharper. A few women acquired concessions of their own, while many others became labourers in the salt fields.

The completion of the Master Plan was followed by a significant delay in its implementation, prompting ASAF to campaign for the lagoon to be used communally for the benefit of all. To give voice to women and garner attention for their peculiar challenges, ASAF sub-convened ASSWA. These were mainly labouring women salt winners who had lost their autonomous production through the VSL concession and *atsiakpo*. They saw *atsiakpo* as an illegal mining system that allowed a few people, including affluent women, to accumulate wealth while dispossessing many poor women. The advocacy to stop the new mining model resulted in visible tensions among these classes of women - those who mobilised to overthrow the *atsiakpo* system and those who supported it. Many women supported ASSWA's advocacy for a return to the commons salt-winning logic. However, the group and others, such as ASAF, faced hostilities from the beneficiaries of the *atsiakpo* mining system. This tension was lurking in the background to unfold on a bigger scale.

In 2020, when EGL took over the concession, tensions were ignited. EGL's concession grant subsumed the *atsiakpo* salt pans and dispossessed these categories of women as well. This clearly complicated women's struggles and could be seen in the divisions among them and the contradictory attitudes to

different kinds of dispossession. For example, within ASSWA, some members see EGL's concession grant as an infringement on women's rights. However, others hold the view that the community salt pans that EGL started constructing were an answer to the long-held advocacy for a return to the commons, which would bring women back to salt winning. For the latter, their position on this type of commons is a visible resistance to *atsiakpo* that had long displaced many women. Confronted with the prospect of prolonged dispossession of many women and the associated livelihood crises, they see the community pans from EGL as the closest semblance of a commons which can benefit many ordinary women. However, it is essential to emphasise that the creation of eleven community salt pans was outside EGL's business plan and part of the agreement signed with chiefs and the State. The construction of these salt pans resulted from people's resistance to the takeover and was not bound by law. Since the business plan has a strategy of finding alternative livelihoods for the people, it shows that the real intention behind community salt pans is to nip resistance in the bud and generate good publicity. Besides, since EGL controls water flow in the lagoon, there is no assurance that brine will be available for salt mining in the pans when needed. In Adina, there is flooding at a legally required community buffer. The women said that the company's activities caused the flooding. The site is now a waste dumping site.

We argue that if *atsiakpo* with its brand of dispossession of many women had not happened, EGL, which caused dispossession of a greater magnitude, would not have divided the women's front. If the concept of the commons represents a shared interest of the women, then the dispossession caused by the *atsiakpo* and later EGL, and the subsequent fragmentation of the women's movement in the area, reveal the underlying class contradictions in the struggle. This indicates that the struggle is not monolithic in its character and form. The women's advocacy for a return to sustainable salt winning in the commons simultaneously addresses the questions of resource management, social reproduction, economic justice and environmental sustainability. Yet we found that the framing of the issue around salt has shifted much more with the formation of ASLA, which started in 2020 to confront EGL. We found many defected ASSWA members in ASLA, which is a mixed group of men and women, *atsiakpo* owners and *atsiakpo* dispossessed women who became labourers. The complex

composition of ASLA, which unifies different groups of people to fight an industrial miner, is reminiscent of past struggles when salt was at the centre of Ada's nationhood. Currently, it is ASLA, with membership drawn from different communities of the Ada traditional area, which is at the forefront of the mass resistance mobilisation and struggles against EGL. For this group, the central issue is sovereignty and community ownership of the lagoon and its resources.

In Ada Songor, all women mobilised in the struggle in the salt mining areas chanted "Songor Livelihood for All" and thus aligned with a vision that the lagoon resources should benefit all women. Yet, there is no consensus on the model of production that will benefit all women. The divergent views among women on what production models are favourable for women's livelihood are long-standing. Even within ASSWA, individual members have divergent views about the commons through community pans and whether it presents a better livelihood option for women than working as labourers in the *atsiakpo* system. These reflect how the different categories of women encounter the livelihood effects of the progressive privatisation and enclosures of the commons.

Conclusion

Women in Ghana have adopted various strategies to challenge the State, corporations, and patriarchal power in general (see Torvikey 2021). In this paper, we highlight how women use confrontation to tackle threats from private companies, the State and traditional authorities from which companies derive their legitimacy. We contextualised the history of women's struggles in the salt mining frontlines within the growing State repression in the extractive sector, the strengthening of State power in natural resource ownership and the marginalisation of community mining to benefit corporate entities. We reflected on the multifaced nature of the feminist struggles, the class tensions in the front and neoliberal disruptions in salt mining.

Women's struggles and confrontations are in defence of the old commons and shared identity through which many categories of women secured their livelihoods. By defying the State, their traditional authorities and the companies amidst the violence which confronts them, women demonstrate their demand for constitutional and socio-economic rights. The evolution of the production

models has shaped the mobilisation strategies of women. We have shown that class differences became more evident as the privatisation of the commons unfolded and profit motives of production superseded the moral economy that had driven the collective production logic in the past. The protracted livelihood crises have also systematically fragmented the women's front, culminating in a hiatus where industrial mining in Ada, for example, inserted a false version of commons in women's mobilisation demands.

Various groups, such as ASAF, ASSWA, and the women salt winners in the Keta Lagoon area, are working together to protect their salt resources. They are running campaigns through different media channels, but face threats from powerful institutions. At the same time, they are learning how to build their movement and strengthen their cause. Dispossession drives resistance against capital, but the struggles also show women's objection to oppression in their households and by the State and traditional institutions. The collective efforts by women, such as pooling resources, using cultural capital and working of their own volition without external control, challenge traditional relations of submission, exploitation, and oppression. The women's struggles are feminist in nature as they demand sustainable mining, socio-economic rights, production autonomy and respect for community salt production practices rooted in common resource access.

Notes

1. Salt winning is a method of salt extraction through the solar process of evaporation of sea salt where there is an absence of construction of dykes and embankments. Salt mining is a general term for salt production, but mining is mainly used to describe controlled production.
2. UN Resolution 1803(XVII) of December 14th 1962 called for nation-states to have “Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources”.
3. <https://www.mincom.gov.gh/acts/>
4. USD1 = GHS11.8 in April 2022.
5. Women, Bonikope, April 22nd 2022.
6. Women’s Focus Group Discussion, Matsekope, April 27th, 2022
7. Women, Adina.
8. In-depth interview, leader, ASSWA, May 6th 2022.
9. Woman, Adina.
10. In-depth interview, leader no. 1 of Adina female protests, Adina, April 30th 2022.
11. In-depth interview, leader no. 2 of Adina female protests, Adina, April 30th 2022.
12. Key informant interview, male respondent, Adina, April 30th 2022.
13. In-depth interview, ASSWA leader, May 6th 2022.

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Feminism and Neoliberalism: Women Farmers Rewriting a Gendered Land Tenure Reform in Sidi Kacem

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Abstract

This paper addresses the collective land tenure reforms of 2019, specifically from the perspective of local women farmers in the Moroccan Gharb region. One of the questions the paper seeks to answer is how the rhetoric of “women’s rights” interacts with, resists, or supports neoliberal land tenure reforms. This paper relies on participant observation of classes attended by local women farmers about these new land tenure reform laws and policies as well as in-depth interviews with women farmers. The focus is on how a global and local corporate agenda is being implemented, and how it is creating a mainstream discourse on “women’s rights” and “gender inclusion”. The paper explores how local women farmers are negotiating with dominant land tenure policies and feminist rhetoric staged by the government, donors, and women’s rights NGOs regarding the representation of women’s land rights.

Keywords: land tenure, gender, governance feminism, Moroccan women small farmers, neoliberal reforms

Introduction

Women’s inclusion in the 2019 land tenure reform came both as a response to a rising women’s movement around collective land expropriation and privatisation (Ait Mous and Berriane 2016; Eddouda, 2021, 2022) and in compliance with the American partner Millennium Challenge Corporation’s (MCC) stipulation that the programme be gender inclusive. As I will argue, this egalitarian, gendered rhetoric, as initiated by the prominent women’s rights

group *Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc* (Democratic Association of Women of Morocco) (ADFM), and supported by State policies subsequently put forward by MCC's gender inclusion programme, forces an abstract, urban, middle class, and Western feminist lexicon on working-class peasant women farmers' complex experiences with land and agrarian change.

This paper examines the encounter between feminist rhetoric and the corporate land privatisation process from the perspective of the women small farmers affected by the 2019 land tenure reform. Legally speaking, and in the rhetoric of the various education and socioeconomic programmes that supported the reform, the changes were framed in terms of a shift from collective to individual land tenure. Indeed, the 2019 reform programmes received international funding from the American MCC because the effort aimed to turn collective land into private individual property. In Morocco, that process is called *melkinisation*; private, titled lands (as opposed to lands held collectively or by the State, for example) are referred to as *melk*, so the term “melkinisation” refers to a specific privatisation process that involves the conversion and redistribution of collective land into *melk* (private property).

In what follows, I first provide the theoretical and historical background of the 2019 reform by outlining the contours of the concept of governance feminism and its manifestation in rural Morocco. Second, I discuss scholarship that problematises the encounter between feminism and corporate capitalism. Specifically, I examine the gap between women farmers' understanding of their own liberation and the way it is perceived by the ruling classes, who have designed the new public roles for these women in their communities. Third, this paper examines the responses of women farmers, both individually and collectively, focusing on how their responses conform to or subvert systems of power and domination, including governance feminism. Among the questions the paper attempts to answer is how women's rights rhetoric interacts with and supports neoliberal land tenure reforms and, more specifically, how the alliance between feminism and corporate capitalism is at once received and undercut by local farmers. The paper relies on 1) in-depth interviews with women farmers who embody “public” roles that have placed them at the forefront of the land reform efforts in the Beer Taleb ethnic collective and 2) participant observation of functional literacy classes in a small village located in Beer Taleb commune.

Local women farmers had been attending that class for twelve months at the time of observation, and all of them happened to be in the ethnic collective that was selected as the site for launching the melkinisation programme.

While this paper focuses on the effects of the 2019 legal amendments, it is important to understand that this land tenure reform resurrected a history of tension between communal, rural peasant values, on the one hand, and market-based, bourgeois urban values, on the other, as both the colonial 1919 laws and the 2019 reforms confirmed the authority of a centralised power while serving an extractive capitalist rationale. In this context, the alignment of the official narrative of gender-based egalitarian reform with contemporary feminist activism provides moral support for yet more extraction that has long benefitted urban capital at the expense of local peasants. Moroccan legal sociologist Néjib Bouderbala's (1996) analysis of Moroccan plural land tenure laws has demonstrated how legal plurality reveals an ancient tension between agrarian, pre-Islamic customary law (*Orf*) and urban, Islamic, centralised merchant-centred law. Yet as Bouderbala (1996) lays bare, the 1919 law defined, for the first time, the legal framework for collective property rights, which fell under the custody and political authority of the colonial State. Thus, for Bouderbala, extractive and political colonial control resided in finding legal formulas that would undergird colonial land tenure, the protection of colonial property and maintenance of the status quo in the countryside, and the adoption of a property regime that permitted the development of capitalist exploitation of the communal land. Bouderbala's analysis of land tenure laws reveals a top-down, colonial attitude that the post-colonial State inherited and further sharpened—one that persists in today's governance feminism.

Governance Feminism in Rural Morocco: The Millennium Challenge Corporation as an Example of American State Feminism

Halley et. al.'s (2018) concept of governance feminism is crucial for understanding the way that the 2019 land tenure reform and women's land rights efforts appropriated and deployed feminist and human rights lexicon as a strategy of co-optation. According to Halley et. al., governance feminism is "every form in which feminists and feminist ideas exert a governing will within human affairs—to follow Michel Foucault's definition of governmentality, every form in which feminists and feminist ideas 'conduct the conduct of men'" (ix). They further assert that governance feminism involves "the five C's: collaboration, compromise, collusion, complicity, and co-optation" (xv). Halley et. al. note that governance feminism raises questions such as "what forms of feminism 'make sense' to power elites as they gradually let women in? ... What are the distributive consequences of the partial inclusion of some feminist projects? Who benefits and who loses?" (ix). The authors also show the success of governance feminism in changing laws and institutions, as well as its emancipatory impact on women; they argue that "in as much as the United States is currently the sole global superpower—its feminists had entrée all over the world on transnational routes of circulation" (Halley et. al. 2018, xx). Because an important element in the Moroccan-American bilateral agreement aimed to encourage "land productivity"—that is, to open collective land to the market economy—in the case of Morocco's land reform, governance feminism is substantiated by the reform's gender inclusion programme and the role that this apparently feminist idea plays in "conduct[ing] the conduct of men" (ix).

The MCC website and social media accounts show frequent events—conferences, workshops, reports and figures—related to the ongoing collective land privatisation effort, which includes over 55,000 hectares of land in the irrigated perimeters of Gharb to the west, a coastal lowland plain that extends about 50 miles (80 km) along the Atlantic coast and reaches some 70 miles (110 km) inland, and Haouz to the south. According to a video clip on the MCC Facebook account promoting this programme (<https://www.facebook.com/MillenniumChallenge>), the project aims at "supporting 30,000 heirs of collective land, including 15,800 women, in the establishment of land titles,

capacity building of 132,000 farmers through theoretical and practical training and exchange trips, financial support for 15 women and youth cooperatives, and implementation of functional literacy [programmes for] 9,132 female participants.”

Gender inclusion stands out as one of the main pillars of MCC’s investment, with the intention of fostering a local dynamic that supports the programme’s goals. For that reason, some of the funding went toward studies meant to help identify the channels through which this reform could best be communicated to the local population. These studies led to the determination that a type of education known as functional literacy would be a good tool for targeting and socialising local populations, especially women farmers, in the values of “land productivity”, “development”, “autonomy” and “entrepreneurship” (Millennium Challenge Corporation). The programme additionally included exchange visits and cooperative grant money contests. In this vein, both the Moroccan and American MCC offices celebrated the closure of the project with the establishment of a permanent structure called the *Centre d’inclusion des femmes au foncier* (Center for Women’s Inclusion in Land Property) (CIFF).

In an interview with Moroccan TV channel Medi 1 TV, Alice Albright, CEO of MCC, indicated that gender is an important component of what she calls land productivity, citing the impact of the programme on local women’s autonomy as well as general land productivity (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moxIeKvWDTk>). Albright’s statement typifies the use of feminist language by corporate, State-affiliated institutions and is thus an example of governance feminism—in this case, of American State feminism, in the guise of the MCC, “exerting its governing will” (Halley et al. 2018, ix P) in rural Morocco.

In Beer Taleb, as well as in many other ethnic collectives in rural Gharb, American State feminism has created an unprecedented marketplace for human rights. Moroccan-American bilateral cooperation, generally, and MCC’s gender inclusion programme, more specifically, provides the channel through which American State feminism travels to Morocco. The programme appears primarily to respond to women’s inclusion in the land titling process by “taking up the language of injury and redress” (Abu-Lughod et al. 2023, 2). In addition to the naming of women as collective land beneficiaries for the first time, the

aforementioned programmes, including the functional literacy classes, confirm the formal legal emancipatory framework of the 2019 land reforms, and its apparent success as a form of governance feminism. Indeed, during the aforementioned public TV interview, Alice Albright states that the programme has achieved all of its objectives and has made Morocco an example to be followed. As this and other statements from Millennium Challenge Corporation officials show, the main themes of this programme are gender inclusion and land productivity, which go hand in hand in this program. Beer Taleb, for example, shows evidence of the birth and growth of an unprecedented social life oriented towards women's rights.¹ In addition to the functional literacy classes and teacher training that educators are to attend either in person or online, women of the village have gone on several "educational excursions", where they learned about successful women's cooperatives in other parts of the country. They now know, through these programmes, that they no longer can be only farmers, mothers and/or housewives; they need to get involved in more income-generating activities in order to integrate into the market beyond their family village economy.

Taken together, these programmes and the statements from MCC show a clear correlation between free market economy values and liberal State feminist language, exemplifying some of the scholarship that has analysed the rapport between feminism and capitalism. For example, Issa G. Shivji raises questions about democracy and fairness as opposed to what he calls "top-down bureaucratic approaches and notions of 'administrative justice'" (Shivji 1998, 57). While the Moroccan reform illustrates an example of top-down administrative justice, it also had to show some kind of receptive attitude to feminist grievances. This apparent response to feminist claims mostly focused on the positive legal acknowledgement of women's rights to the land. Dzodzi Tsikata's (2003) analysis of debates surrounding land tenure reform in Tanzania and its impact on women's interests shows how women constitute a site of contest among government officials, academic researchers and NGO activists. Shahra Razavi (2011) and Ambreena Manji (1998) show the shortcomings of merely adding gender to an

1 I borrowed this term from Lila Abu-Lughod's piece "The Active Social Life of 'Muslim Women's Rights': A Plea for Ethnography Not Polemic, with Cases from Egypt and Palestine." Abu-Lughod explains social life as "differential mediation through various social networks and technical instruments" (Abu-Lughod 2010).

existing system of agrarian change, arguing that gendered analysis should instead entail a change in the “core assumptions” that address various aspects of agricultural issues (Razavi 2011, 47). Relatedly, Naidu and Ossome (2016) have also noted the failure of land reform to keep promises of economic growth and inclusion of all segments of society. They note the importance of invisible labour in a capitalist market, despite the fact that the latter devalues the former (51-52). Additionally, Naidu and Ossome (2016) discuss feminist pleas for a gender-based land reform so that women can use land as a negotiating card with patriarchy; however, they acknowledge that women can sometimes withdraw from the costly family contentions that land rights can bring about and, further, that land reform can be pointless when so many are landless or hold very little land. Indeed, many of the women interviewed for this article confirmed the pointlessness of having to split an already small portion of land with their brothers. Most of them said that gaining land rights is not worth losing what such brotherhood means to them.

Land Rights and Women’s Rights: Government Use of Feminist Rhetoric

Women’s land rights activism in Morocco gained prominence in early 2000, when Rkia Belot, a land rights activist from the suburbs of Kenitra, sought the support of the Rabat-based NGO ADFM (Ait Mous and Berriane 2016; Eddouada 2021). In the intervening years, women’s rights have become the principal framework for land-grabbing endeavours, providing necessary moral support—in the vein of governance feminism—for both the eradication of the commons and the rapid implementation of neoliberal efforts to commodify communal land (Eddouada 2021; Berriane 2015; Ait Mous and Berriane 2016). While some Moroccan scholars, such as Fadma Ait Mous and Yasmine Berriane (2016) and Fatiha Daoudi (2011), have analysed the ADFM-led movement for equal shares in collective land, this paper focuses on women who are not necessarily part of the movement and who have never been exposed to the language of rights.

Perspectives from Women Farmers in Beer Taleb Commune: Navigating Institutional Complexities

The experiences of women farmers described in this section show what happens when local women's stories interact with corporate and governmental attempts to "maximise land productivity". My interviews with some of the local women farmers suggest that many had prior experience, beginning in 2005, with governmental income-generating project grants under the INDH (National Human Development Initiative), the government programme aimed at reducing poverty through income-generating and "participatory democracy" projects. Like the more recent melkinisation effort, "the INDH aims to bring a neoliberal modernity that embodies the principles of participation, self-entrepreneurship and attention to civil society" (Hibou and Tozy 2020, 463). In effect, the INDH served to consolidate the power of the Ministry of Interior and invalidate local government, and was instrumentalised to create and then co-opt NGOs as well as local associations (Rignall 2021). As the NDH attempted to encourage local economic projects and other initiatives, it also targeted and encouraged female entrepreneurship.

Fouzia's story: educating local women

Fouzia is a woman in her forties and a mother of three. She is the teacher of the functional literacy classes I observed for three months. Her assessment of her experience constitutes one of the main narratives guiding my analysis of the ongoing feminisation of land tenure reforms in Sidi Kacem. Fouzia lives in a small village called Ouled Jlal in the suburbs of Sidi Kacem. She dropped out of school just before completing her high school education. She remembers her school life with much pain and tears because she had to live for a while with some relatives who did not treat her well. Later, she moved in with another family, where she exchanged domestic labour for room and board so that she could continue her schooling. She mentioned that her host family treated her better than her relatives. When I asked her if she could describe why those school days were so hard, Fouzia suddenly burst into tears. Her sister, who was also sitting with us in the living room, had a tense and serious face; I felt that something difficult and sensitive must have happened and that her sister must have known about those events.

After leaving school, Fouzia went to Tangier and found work. On one of her visits to her family, however, she was told that somebody had asked for her hand and that she should get married. She did and moved to Casablanca to live with her husband. Yet after a few years, Fouzia returned to the village. “Life was too hard and expensive there,” she said. After raising her three children, Fouzia finally went back to school and, in 2020, took her baccalaureate exam at the same time as her son, 20 years after she had first left school. She successfully passed her exams and enrolled in the Islamic Studies Department at Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, where she is pursuing a BA degree, although she cannot regularly attend classes and sit for every exam. Fouzia is highly respected in her village; students seek her help with homework, and she happily offers her time to tutor them. She is even known to local authorities for her education. For that reason, as confirmed by the cheikh, she was one of the women whom local authorities proudly introduced to Ivanka Trump when she visited the region in 2019.

Fouzia was invited to the official ceremony that Trump attended alongside several other women farmers including Fatiha, Aisha, and Jamila. The choice to have these women farmers present at the ceremony, as Samira Mizbar, a gender inclusion programme official, noted, came after a great deal of research involving interviews and suggestions from local authorities. In an interview with me, Mizbar added that the women selected needed to be local farmers with entrepreneurial qualities; they also needed to be fearless and feel comfortable speaking in public and posing in front of the camera. The ceremony included various members of the power elite, such as top Moroccan governmental officials, large-scale local and international media, and American donors, represented by top MCC officials—i.e. representatives from the major institutions that Fouzia and other women farmers have to navigate as they seek education and land rights. Al-Gharb was specifically selected as a pilot region because it offered an example of Morocco’s private property land titling that equally included men and women.

From the perspective of Fouzia and other women I interviewed, the narrative of gender equality and modernisation championed by the melkinisation programme and its rhetoric looks abstract and empty. Fouzia herself represents a living experience of the emptiness of the neoliberal promises that “development” and “prosperity” will come with the commodification of communal land. In

order to implement its gender-inclusive programme, the national agency working against illiteracy started the functional literacy programme that has targeted women as future landowners and business owners. As noted above, Fouzia was one of the first women to start teaching these literacy classes. Before that, she had gone through various training workshops that showed her how to use the textbook designed for these classes. In addition to being one of five women selected to represent the whole region at the programme's official launch, Fouzia was chosen to implement the values of "citizenship and active participation in development" that she proudly disseminates during her classes. She is so committed to her new role in the village that she offers a room in her house as a classroom when her students stopped attending the classes at the village school because it was too far (around 70 women regularly attend her classes). Fouzia wanted to use the local mosque as an alternative classroom, but her application was rejected. She records videos of her classes and her awareness-raising sessions with the women of her village in order to have evidence of her dedication to this programme.

I interviewed Fouzia together with two sociologists and accompanied by the village cheikh early in the day. We were six people sitting in her living room. Fouzia patiently answered all the questions, and at the end of the visit, she walked us to the classroom in her house. The room was decorated with statements showing the classroom values, such as "The farmer is a citizen who participates in her country's development". As a practice exercise in one of her literacy classes, Fouzia had written on the board, "Women contribute to their country's development"; "Women and men are equal"; "A woman is an MP, farmer and teacher"; "Work is one of women's rights, we have to start a cooperative and contribute to the national economic development". Each student came to the board and read the sentences in front of the class.

Fouzia believes that the government's official involvement in land titling will end the uncertainty, confusion and, especially, the family disputes about where people's land borders begin and end. However, I could see her struggle to own the language and the story of her land amidst the many people and interests negotiating the contested site of "women's rights to the land" which—as noted—now includes Moroccan urban veteran feminists, multiple government institutions (including the Ministries of Interior and Agriculture and local development associations), and American corporate partnerships with the Moroccan

institutions that are implementing the neoliberal land privatisation reforms. When she talked about how she would assess her experience with the literacy programme, Fouzia revealed much disappointment regarding how it has turned out. Initially, she had believed in the serious commitment of the government, given the VIP names that were associated with the programme. Referring to the day of Ivanka Trump's visit with the Moroccan government delegation, Fouzia said that she trusted this programme after the impressive ceremony she attended. Yet her trust is being tested every day by the total absence of accountability, especially given that she has not been paid after serving for twelve months as a teacher in the programme. All her calls to the local development association subcontracted by the literacy agency to implement the programmes have gone unreturned (while telling me this, Fouzia kept showing me text messages from the local association leader telling her that he was in a meeting and would call her back). Her visits to the local office of the literacy agency have failed to clarify her situation (a local expression meaning financial compensation the local association promised her for twelve months teaching). Because of difficult access to any interlocutor, she tried to use the presence of an important Moroccan official with the MCC's gender inclusion programme who was at the aforementioned conference to ask for help with clarifying her situation, but the official kept delaying a clear response. For all of these reasons, Fouzia is gradually realising the emptiness of the promises she so deeply believed at the outset, especially with regard to her involvement as an active agent of "change" as defined by the new land tenure reform policy. Indeed, Fouzia felt that she probably could have had more access to the benefits of this programme if she had demonstrated business skills instead of her voluntary education services. Recently, in fact, some women were awarded grants for cooperative projects by the same programme. She mentioned that she had seen on TV that some of the women in neighbouring villages were awarded this grant, and she wondered whether it would be better for her to use some of her time to start the kind of couscous cooperative that an official at the local office of "agricultural investment" had advised her to found. Despite her disappointment, Fouzia still believes that educating women in her village is her mission, and she talks about the invaluable reward of seeing how much women learn from her classes, as they move from absolute illiteracy to a literacy level sufficient for reading and memorising verses from the Quran for

their prayers. As Fouzia says, with strong enthusiasm and faith, that reward is worth all the hard unpaid work and the time she spends on this programme.

Another form of the communal: Fouzia's class and students' perspectives

My encounter with Fouzia's students was limited to the classroom setting, and I only had the chance to have in-between-class conversations with a few women sitting next to me. Both these short conversations and the class response showed that the women's interest in class represents another form of the communal, which reinvents itself despite the values dictated by the "teachings" of the textbook. During the class review, the women showed huge enthusiasm for memorising Quranic verses. Some students stood out because of the number of verses they could memorise. Finally, the teacher led a demonstration of the full class reciting Quranic verses. In another moment of powerful communal spirit, the class made its last statement (since this was the official last class in the one-year functional literacy gender inclusion programme) about how women speak back to the new reform policies' values of profit, entrepreneurship and autonomous individualism. The women's statement, in contrast, seemed to revolve around the power of the community, religious education and piety.

Although the textbooks the students and the teacher were using largely echoed the reform policy values of autonomy and profit, the women managed to invent their own classroom norms and values that did not dutifully follow what the textbook dictates. Over time, the class became a space where women learned and memorised the Quran, nurtured both their individual and communal spiritual lives, learned how to read since this is after all a literacy class for illiterate students, and enhanced their already existing and abundant social life in a classroom setting. Sitting together in a circle on the floor, they followed class while breastfeeding their babies, inquiring about each other's physical and mental health, sharing stories and practising group therapy. During the class, I learned that two of the women in the room had recently lost their sons, who had emigrated abroad. They recounted that their sons kept coming to them in their dreams, telling them about the afterlife. Another woman was leaving for Mecca for a 40-day Ramadan *Umrah* (pilgrimage), all paid for by her immigrant daughter in France. Yet another woman sitting next to me in the class, who needed to travel

to spend Ramadan with her two daughters in Tangier, said that she already was missing her class and her classmates; she texted everyone to ask about how the class went, noting that this class had become a very important part of her life. Indeed, the last class before Ramadan was also supposed to be the closing session for the programme, but it was in reality the end of the official literacy class only. The students, or the “beneficiaries,” as their instructor, echoing land rights language, called them, wanted to continue to show up during Ramadan in order to read and memorise the Quran. All of them said that they did not wish to see their class end and that they would keep attending even after the end of the programme. As mentioned at the outset of this section, this class seemed to have created a friendly space of communion, with the prospect of entrepreneurial opportunity receding into the background as both a possibility and an abstract idea.

That sense of community developed clearly among the students, but the day of the programme evaluation marked a turning point for the rapport between the local farmers and the donor institution and local authorities. A group of American, French and Moroccan officials turned up to meet the class. Both Fouzia, the teacher, and the students were surprised by the last-minute change in meeting venue from their classroom in Fouzia’s house in Ouled Jlal to another location in Sidi Kacem. A vehicle drove all the students and the teachers to a school in Sidi Kacem urban centre, and the students had to answer questions about their class experience and how far this classroom in Sidi Kacem was from their homes. The teacher reported the students’ disappointment, anger and frustration with being compelled to pretend that the new meeting venue was their classroom and to lie and contribute to a fake and deceptive story about their class. The teacher was told that the meeting’s setting was changed for reasons that had to do with the officials’ safety. When I asked about the meaning of safety, since I had been travelling alone to the village and experienced nothing but absolute safety there, the teacher told me that, in this case, safety meant that the officials would not feel comfortable walking in a place “full of thistle”. The teacher of the class noted that she saw the number of students go down after the day of the programme evaluation. The instrumentalisation of the evaluation, even if it aligned with the official programme’s aims, disregarded the experience and the agency of the women and further foregrounded the top-down tone of the privatisation policy.

Aisha's story, in "conversation" with local journalists and sociologists

Through the same network of journalists and sociologists that introduced me to Fouzia, I also met Aisha, a farmer in the same village as Fouzia; in fact, Aisha told me that she planned to join Fouzia's class. Aisha is one of the women involved in the NDH, and, as president of a local cooperative, she received a government loan. She believed that the five-year project was unsuccessful; the goat farming did not suit Al-Gharb's land, and all the goats died. Despite the project's failure, Aisha's name became known to the local authorities, and as one of the women concerned with the melkinisation project, she was also invited to the launch event. While at the event Aisha and the other women—who are all potential beneficiaries of the new land tenure reform—were introduced as exemplars of "gender inclusion", Aisha would only have access to land because her father passed away, and she would only get half of what her brother received, as stipulated by the norms of inheritance law. Her father left behind 3.5 hectares and had three sons and five daughters, all of whom are heirs of the land according to the new law. When asked about her plans for her future land ownership, she mentioned that her share would be very small; she also noted that it would not be worth contesting it, as doing so would ruin her relationship with her brother. She would rather leave her share to him because he had been farming the land since their father's death. After the news of women's shares in the land became known, her brother took the initiative to give her MAD2,000 (around USD200); Aisha would receive this amount as annual compensation for her share of the land. Although the amount is little and mainly symbolic, both Aisha and her husband thought that the change in access to land was very significant.

When I spoke to Aisha, she was accompanied by her husband, who sometimes intervened and answered for her. The local village Imam, he talked about how an injustice (*zolm*) was being lifted with the promise of change. They both agreed that even if the MAD2,000 DH that Aisha receives is essentially a symbolic amount, it nevertheless represents an acknowledgement of women's rights to the land. In this vein, a local journalist commented that, if the event inaugurating the melkinisation policy constituted a rupture with the past, the presence of Ivanka Trump constituted a shift toward a new era—a shift from darkness to light. Like Aisha's husband's assertion, the journalist's comment pointed to a shift from absence to acknowledgement of women's rights; he

added that Ivanka Trump was like an “angel” who came to liberate women and leave. At this point, the journalist and sociologist dominated the discussion. The sociologist explained that the context of the event was influenced mainly by a women’s rights culture that is championed by many international organisations. These organisations require a gender-oriented approach to be implemented in every project. The journalist highlighted the 2011 constitution and Morocco’s adoption of international standards of equality. In response, the sociologist noted that, in addition to the dynamics put forth in the constitution, there was also a local women’s rights dynamic. Yet international aid is always conditioned by “gender inclusion” and international cooperation always makes women’s representation a primary condition, in addition to what is stipulated in the 62/17 law that codified equality for the first time. However, implementation is different from the text of the law, as the sociologist noted, and in fact, the law and practice are two completely different things. During this conversation, the sociologist added that what he referred to as “human rights culture” would also include the NDH, which began the intervention into local dynamics that created the context for the assertion of women’s land rights in a place like Sidi Kacem. The NDH, according to the sociologist, afforded these women an opportunity to learn values such as association work, life and work outside the domestic space, and income-generating projects. In his view, this milieu enabled local women to learn about the existence of associations and possibilities for funding. The sociologist added that the new law builds on these existing policies to create a “new reality”.

As the conversation continued, the sociologist nuanced his analysis and pointed out that this land privatisation effort was not really about gender or the development of rural areas; the priority, according to him, was to submit land that has been outside intensive capitalist exploitation and integrate it into the “modern economic wheel”. He raised the question of whether the melkinisation effort could deliver on its promise of creating a rural middle class, as the new 62/17 law clearly depends on the constitution of a middle class in rural Morocco. He reminded us that the overall purpose of these efforts was to integrate 15 million hectares into the market economy so that rural Morocco would have to include working-class or waged farmers, middle-class farmers, and “big” farmers. The sociologist concluded by noting that this was the economic dynamic that

the State was planning to create. Indeed, as noted, the State's agenda is to open this land to the modern market economy; the discussion of women or land rights holders, in general, is marginal to this debate—the point at which feminist ideals are instrumentalised in support of already existing capitalist aims. The sociologist's argument during this conversation suggests the ways in which class and gender continue to impact each other and to shape agrarian reform overall, as noted earlier. That is, the instrumentalisation of feminist ideals here is clear insofar as the incorporation of those ideals insulates any of the farmers from exposure to corporate and capitalist exploitation, though their class status may affect how deeply they are exploited.

Shrifa, the entrepreneur farmer

The local sociologist also introduced me to 59-year-old Shrifa, whom he referred to as a woman who did a man's job because she was responsible for her whole family and for farming the land and running family business. When we visited Shrifa, her husband was away at work in Essaouira in the South, because, as she explained, the family needs a monthly income, which agriculture did not provide. Besides farming her land, Shrifa had started a snail's cooperative with her two daughters and sister-in-law. One of her daughters was the president of the cooperative, but she was not present during our two visits; we only spoke with her on the phone. Despite multiple attempts to tell Shrifa that we had nothing to do with the government, our second visit was extremely uncomfortable because the interview felt to her like a government or police inquiry. I learned later that Shrifa and her daughter had applied for a grant from the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) to fund their cooperative, so perhaps they were not willing to provide information that could be used against their grant application. Shrifa's daughter, Majdoline, did end up getting the grant and was one of the women featured on a public TV programme that advertised the new land tenure reform policy.

Fatiha, the educator and potential landowner

Fatiha was a thirty-two-year-old preschool teacher. Her story, like those of the other women mentioned here, illustrates her hope and ambition to own a piece of land. When asked about what owning land meant to her, she said that she was finally able to feel that she exists, despite the fact that she had not yet obtained her papers (her *titre foncier*). Like many of the other women, Fatiha was encouraged to take part in what the local sociologist called the public sphere, and she seemed very much integrated into that realm. She did not farm her land herself and was happy that her younger brother was willing to take on her father's role in farming it. She would not put up with a controlling husband who could not tolerate her "public" responsibilities, and she hoped that her future husband would understand that she is not a typical rural woman. Together with other women in the village, she aspired to partake in the village's booming corporate culture and start a livestock project.

Jamila, the widow farmer

Jamila was a 45-year-old widow with three children. She dropped out of school after three years of schooling because, as she said, her "parents did not quite understand the importance of education". Jamila identified as a farmer. She became a single mother when her husband died in 2010. At that time, Jamila also became responsible for the three hectares of land that her husband left. She did not have the means to farm it herself, so she first rented it for half of the harvest and later rented it out for an annual amount of MAD10,000 (around USD1,000). Jamila dreamed of digging her own well to irrigate her land, once she obtained her land title. She would also be able to apply for a loan for her project. The annual USD1,000 rent that she received hardly paid three months of her living expenses, Jamila said, so all these years she had relied on family support to raise her three children. One day, Jamila received a phone call from the local authority office *Q'iyada*, and then a woman arrived from Rabat to collect information about her and her children. Jamila did not think that anything had changed since the land melkinisation ceremony; rather, she felt that officials had shown up and then disappeared,

We do not know why this woman came [talking about Ivanka Trump]. After three years, and since 2019, nothing substantial has happened. They told us that in five years all the land will be titled. They said that they will start with our village; in that case, we should already have gotten our paper. Until now, we have not seen anything. I feel that the women including myself were used as a decoration for the event. I told the governor that today you need us, that we never see any one of you around, they only wanted to have their event, take pictures and disappear. They all laughed [referring to the officials] because they knew I was right. I went to this meeting because I thought that it was a good initiative; this whole region is marginalised and does not get any government attention. Nobody from the government has ever visited this place; it was a good thing that at least journalists came and got to know this part of the country, so it was a kind of advertisement for this area for it to become known to journalists and to the world, that at least Ouled Taleb in Sidi Kacem gets to be located on the world map. We have nothing to lose, even if we had to wake up before dawn in order to be on time and had a sleepless night.

Across these stories are glimpses of Fatiha's reserved attitude and quiet indignation, Aisha's unconditional enthusiasm and optimism, and Jamila's straightforwardness. Taken together, these responses sum up a situation of confusion, as well as a general feeling of absence and silence after such a sudden and intense presence. Jamila also noted the unfulfilled promises made to the population: the promise of prosperity that was supposed to have materialised with land privatisation seems to have been held hostage to hurdles unknown to the local population. Moroccan MCA officials have revealed the complicated and detailed procedures that are intended to be inclusive even though they primarily honour the country's commitments to its international donors. In this vein, the official narrative does not reflect the unresolved land disputes and conflicts between policy and realities on the ground. The government, key donors, and NGOs deploy the rhetoric of feminism and gender inclusion as it is useful to the broader aims of the neoliberal project that fundamentally undergirds the land reform and melkinisation effort. As Jamila noted, even though the women derive some benefit from the reforms, they and "women's rights" constitute a "decoration" that legitimises broader corporate capitalist goals.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on local women's experiences of the process of land tenure reform as it is shifting from the communal to the individual. Women's disillusionment with the promises of reform is an example of rural life's dependency "on one of the decisive battlegrounds of neoliberal globalisation" (Moore, 2008 cited by Rignall 2021, 54). As Rignall (2021) contends, "Governments around the world have scaled back expenditures and services in rural areas while concentration in global agro-food systems has increased corporate pressures on agrarian livelihoods, especially those of small farmers and agricultural laborers". Despite the regional differences between Rignall's fieldwork site in the Moroccan South and Al-Gharb, her analysis reveals similar capitalist threats to small farming and peasant life. Her analysis showcases the reactions of the farmers, who do not necessarily stand in opposition or resistance to the pressure from global capitalism, but display various instances of "crafting their own rurality" and "reinventing commons" (Rignall 2021)—reactions and attitudes that are very similar to those of Aisha, Fatiha, Shrifa, and, to a lesser extent, Jamila. Fouzia's work and investment in the education of the women of her village; Aisha's daily hard work on her family land; Fatiha's mutual support for her family; Shrifa's family cooperative; and Jamila's dedication to her land and her children's education all indicate that capitalism does not, or perhaps cannot, really "destroy reciprocity or the potential of agrarian livelihoods" (Rignall 2021).

Drawing on the concept of governance feminism, this paper's exploration of this case of women farmers' land rights has offered a glimpse into the complexities of the relationship between corporate capitalism and feminism, a relationship that cannot be narrowly described. Indeed, the advent of a global capitalist feminism that Nancy Fraser describes as the "uncanny double" of a feminism genuinely devoted to achieving true justice does not mean that feminism must be dispensed with altogether (Fraser 2009, 114). In such circumstances, however, and as Fraser notes, it is imperative to move forward with "self-aware[ness]" and a sense of history (114). In the Moroccan context, that means distinguishing between the gender inclusion programmes, instrumentalised for a top-down neoliberal agenda, which operate under feminism's "uncanny double", and a genuinely engaged approach that understands the history and

the significance of collective land. As the State-promoted developmentalist discourse that associates land grabbing with progress and valorises collective land for development purposes, it also deployed arguments that the land tenure changes would involve a redistributive action that would include women for the first time in Moroccan history. Indeed, the 2019 land tenure change is a culmination of changes that started in 2009 in the form of government circulars that allowed women access to collective land's compensation benefits (Berriane 2015). These circulars came as a response to protests led by women's rights NGOs that were asking for equal access to land rights (Eddouada 2021; Ait Mouss and Berriane 2016). Urban feminist groups celebrated these changes as a revolution, yet land rights activists from outside urban women-led movements have critiqued them for being class-biased and for imposing an urban feminist lexicon on rural women's different and specific struggle with land expropriation. Thus, while the discord between urban activists and rural activists is due to a large extent to class divisions, it is also attributable to the context within which rural land rights activists and urban feminists were socialised and introduced to activism (Eddouada 2021, 2022). Naidu and Ossome's (2016) study of the case of India is a useful point of comparison, as it shows another instance in which class biases divided feminist demands for equal land rights and methods for addressing rural women's landlessness. Naidu and Ossome also remark that "class and ethnicity often supersede gender identities" (2016, 69). The discrepancy between feminist demands for a gendered egalitarian approach to land privatisation and the local Oulad Taleb stories related to land that are presented in this paper show a similar disjuncture. While liberal urban feminist groups' insistence on autonomy from family and tribal connections stand against women's access to the land, the farmers I worked with do not see the point of risking family bonds for a small or non-existent piece of land; they would thus make choices based on the communal values of reciprocity and solidarity rather than on individual desire. Women farmers' actions are therefore grounded in values and norms that disrupt feminist resistance to male authority and advocacy for gender equality above all else, but perhaps, they do seek true justice and collectivity in the mould suggested by Fraser. Their stories emanate from a sense of collective belonging to the land as farmers, mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, which does not conform with feminism as it is represented by the

aforementioned urban feminist groups. However, despite the hegemonic status of State-sponsored feminism and neoliberalism, women farmers do not choose to situate themselves in opposition to domination. As Saba Mahmood (2005) puts it, “Agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (15). Thus, by opening themselves up to possibilities promised by the aforementioned land tenure reform, women farmers situate themselves within, rather than against, or in resistance to, the reform. They welcome and sit in the functional literacy class, but they define it on their terms. In this way, the Oulad Taleb farmers are able to subvert melkenisation’s top-down policies from *within* structures set up by the State to control both “subjects and environment” (Scott 1998) in the name of modernity and progress. As James C. Scott (1998,7) puts it: “... certain kinds of states, driven by utopian plans and an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of their subjects, are indeed a mortal threat to human well-being”. The melkenisation policy, based on the preestablished ideas about prosperity, well-being and equality that come with a top-down gender-inclusion programme, might, as this paper has tried to demonstrate, turn out to have room for a utopia. In other words, the dynamics that this gender-inclusion programme has initiated and any alternative versions of justice and collectivity the women farmers may make of it, or within it, remain to be seen.

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Bread or Representation: The Women's Movement in Post Revolution Sudan

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Abstract

Women's role in the Sudanese revolution of 2019 was celebrated, and their bravery and strength were commended by political parties as well as the international community. Women were hopeful of change. Popular feminist groups rallied around a representation campaign, demanding that 40% of women's representation be guaranteed in the constitutional document and transitional government. Examining the effect of the neoliberal wave on feminist movement building, this article aims to assess the representation agenda from two angles: first, how it became the dominant agenda, and second how effective it was in articulating women's demands and prioritising their economic rights. Through interviews with women's rights activists in Khartoum and North Kordofan, we find that the strength of the representation agenda is its bare minimum quality that brings together women groups from different political, racial, and economic backgrounds. The support the agenda received from the international community, and the assumption that the representation of women in positions of power brings women's issues to the forefront, were important factors in its popularisation. However, according to the women activists, the appointment of women into positions of power did not change the direction of the transitional government agenda, nor was it successful in elevating true representatives to these positions. We conclude by arguing that the structural constraints facing the revolutionary movement played a major role in defining the limitations of resistance in economic justice.

Keywords: Sudan, economic rights, representation, feminist movements, neoliberal feminism.

Introduction

The transitional period following the 2018 December revolution (September 2019 - October 2021), gave civil groups in Sudan a window to build the foundations for a Sudanese State based on the revolution's demands of *Freedom, Peace, and Justice*. The post-revolution environment expanded women's political participation following a break from the fundamentalist rhetoric of the previous Muslim Brotherhood regime and limited civic space (SIHA 2015). In the attempt to create a unified voice, women's political groups came together to demand an increase in female participation in the transitional government and Legislative Council to 40%, not only as a goal, but also as a means to other demands such as economic empowerment and the expansion of political and legal rights.

Despite the clear anti-austerity agenda of the revolution, the transitional period witnessed many economic policies such as the lifting of subsidies and the partial liberalisation of the exchange rate, resulting in 163% inflation in 2020 and 358,9% in 2021 (African Development Bank 2022). These conditions contributed to the increased impoverishment and vulnerability of women (UNICEF 2020; UN Women 2020). Given these harsh realities, the onus was on the popular feminist movement and its political allies to mobilise around a transformative agenda. The experience of the transitional period shows that the representation agenda failed to reach its own goals of increased participation or usher in policies aligned with the demands of the majority of Sudanese women living in poverty. While the representation agenda primarily resonated with the aspirations of women in political spheres by challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of mainstream politics, there is no clear evidence of a distinct grassroots feminist agenda. Following the outbreak of the war in Sudan between the Sudanese Military (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudanese women are facing increased violence, economic hardship, and a reversal of recent progress, while the space for mobilisation has been further jeopardised and restricted.

The article makes the connection between what we believe to be the neoliberal influence on the civilian resistance agenda and on the conceptualisation of women's agenda, particularly in the economic sphere. The research was conducted over two years in two states, Khartoum and North Kordofan, and focused on mainstream and fringe bodies in the feminist movement. This allowed

us to examine the contradictions within the feminist movement along geographic, racial, and class lines. The accounts were collected through in-person structured in-depth interviews and analysis of material and content produced and published by these different bodies.

Interviews were conducted with 17 feminists and with women political and civil activists in the capital of Khartoum and Ubbayid city in Northern Kordofan. The respondents included women politicians, members of women empowerment or protection NGOs, issues-based political bodies, and other groups such as labour unions and neighbourhood committees. We paid special attention to representing different age groups, ethnicities, and classes. Additionally, we examined public statements by individuals and institutions, press releases, and materials collected from the beginning of protests in the December 2018 revolution and extending into the transition period, before the breakout of the April 15, 2023 war. As well as descriptive information on organisational makeup and agenda, we also discuss the sources and nature of funding, and activities during the revolution.

The Path to the Revolution: Feminist and Popular Organising

To understand the December revolution, one must place it within the context of decades-long discontent with the authoritarianism, corruption, and failure of public provisioning that characterised policy-making in Sudan after the 1980s, and the rise of neoliberalism. The Muslim Brotherhood regime faced sporadic protests especially in 2012, 2013, and 2016, all triggered by increases in prices of essential commodities. The Sudanese Revolution of 2018 marked a significant turning point in the country's history, as the people protested against the economic crisis characterised by the sharp increase in prices and the scarcity of basic necessities such as bread and fuel. These shortages and price increases were triggered by the independence of South Sudan which resulted in the loss of oil as the main source of foreign currency.

Economic crisis is not a new phenomenon in Sudan's post-independence history. Sudan was one of the first countries to adopt Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). In 1978, the government received financial assistance from the IMF to resolve its budgetary crisis (Bannaga 2005). Between 1977

and 1982, World Bank experts developed policies that focused on cash crops and minerals while cutting subsidies and government spending (Musa and Mohammed 2021; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999). Despite these measures, GDP growth has remained low for over forty years, while social provisioning has deteriorated (Prendergast 1989). The effects of such policies were especially pronounced following State-led liberalisation in the early 1990s, when the State withdrew from providing basic services while it increased its surveillance and security arm (Simsa'a 1998).

Owing to the gender bias of these policies, women in particular were deeply impacted. Tsikata (1995) highlights how SAP policies depend on women's unpaid time to make up for the shortcomings of limited social services. SAPs have resulted in the "re-familiasation" of tasks and placed them on women, effectively using them to absorb economic shocks. Since the 1970s, an increase in unemployment and the migration of men in search of work has resulted in women taking on traditionally male responsibilities while increasingly engaging in precarious work (ILO 2021a). The retreat of the State from public provisioning as well as the rise of armed groups in resource extraction has further exposed women to the double bind of patriarchy and capitalism (Sadasivam 1997).

In 2018, the protests were initially named the "bread protests". This name was rejected by some politicians and activists, who referred to it as limited and demanded that protests be for freedom and against tyranny. While that may be true, the question is why the rejection of hunger and the agitation for public provisioning are not seen as a fundamental part of realising and expanding freedoms. The revolutionary movement itself was characterised by its progressive and flexible nature, as it constantly evolved to reflect the changing dynamics of the struggle. Despite being politically inexperienced, the protesters formulated chants against the Darfur and Yemen wars, demonstrating the movement's commitment to mobilising for progressive politics and breaking away from traditional party politics. In addition to calling for freedom, the chants carried a strong anti-military, anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly in advocating for economic rights and justice.

Leading the revolution was a political coalition called Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) formed around the central goal of ending the rule of Bashir. It featured an array of actors, including the largest political parties and civil

society movements. The coalition played a pivotal role in uniting factions and became the civilian face of the revolution. As protests intensified, the revolution became itself a site of struggle where initial demands were further diluted and morphed into agendas such as the reintegration into the international economy by the national political elite in the FFC following years of economic sanctions on Sudan by the international community (El-Gizouli 2019). In April 2019, the security apparatus of Bashir, including key figures like Abdelfattah Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Hemedi, head of RSF, formed the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and ousted Bashir, due to mounting pressure from protesters. The fall of Bashir marked the beginning of a 52-day sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum and the beginning of a five-month negotiation process between the FFC and the TMC.

When news broke out during the sit-in that Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, countries which were believed to be supportive of the military faction, and RSF especially, would be sending aid to Sudan, a new chant spontaneously emerged “We don’t want aid from KSA even if we eat Foul and Tamia”. The chant reveals the ways in which revolutionary groups had an advanced understanding of socio-political dynamics and their own interests in the ongoing political process.

Following the violent dispersal of protestors from the sit-in site, through a power-sharing deal between FFC and TMC, the two parties formed the transitional government in September 2019. From the beginning of the negotiation, FFC adopted a quota model to share power between its five civilian groups. This strategy continued at the negotiation table where FFC and TMC battled for higher percentages in the three branches of the transitional government: the Sovereign Council, the Executive Government, and the Legislative Council.

However, the post-revolutionary period brought its own set of challenges. The FFC seemed hesitant to demand any curbing of military involvement in politics or the economy, and was eager to adopt neoliberal policies and approaches in the democratisation process and economic reform. The economic reform strategy, devised by the transitional government and supported by the IMF and the World Bank, introduced essentially an austerity package that included lifting subsidies on wheat, fuel, and electricity, reducing overall expenditure, and devaluing the currency. These measures faced domestic resistance, as they directly impacted the very economic grievances that had fuelled the revolution.

The tension between the aspirations of the revolution and the economic policies implemented underscored the complexities of post-revolutionary Sudan.

As a result of the neoliberal formula already outlined, young men and women leading the revolution had found little access to public provisioning, and in the last decade before the revolution, a deepening crisis had left them with no economic opportunities. They were invested in a much more radical transformation of the economic and political structure, as stated in the charter put forth by the resistance committees in late 2022. The charter demanded that economic policymaking be reclaimed to focus on domestic resource mobilisation and not on guidance from international financial institutions (Sudanese Resistance Committees 2022)

To the surprise of the international media, Sudanese women have resisted the Bashir government in many ways. In 2012, women university students protested problems in dormitories, austerity measures, and increases in transportation fares (Medani 2019). The Women Tea Sellers Association, which has a membership of approximately 15,000 in the informal sector in Khartoum, engages regularly in various forms of resistance including protests and advocacy for social provisioning. Groups such as No to Women's Oppression, and organisations such as the Strategic Initiative for Women in Africa (SIHA) played a prominent role in supporting women's rights. Naturally, the revolutionary movement included women who were always politically aware and actively opposed the patriarchal systems that were reinforced and codified into law under Bashir's government.

From the onset, women's rights activists in the revolution unified under the Sudanese Women in Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM), a broad-based coalition aimed at increasing equal representation and centring women's rights in the revolutionary agenda and policy-making in post-revolution Sudan. Abbas (2022, 5) describes the birth of the MANSAM as "the last attempt to unite women activists from all backgrounds in a common front to fight for women's rights and to avoid their constant misuse as wings of patriarchal political parties in Sudan. It brought together many women who were wary of male-dominated politics derailing the women's agenda for the benefit of central state political gains achieved through exploiting women for their votes and political labour." Groups had to put aside their ideological positions to form a unified feminist/women's

agenda which, in order to garner mass support from within the movement, needed to ignore class and racial differences that would necessarily produce different positions and demands. This strategy is not new in women's politics; in response to the patriarchal nature of political parties, (El-Karib 2021), an institutional practice emerged of having women only groups talking about women's issues. This was positive insofar as it challenged the notions of rigid gender roles during the Bashir era, but it limited feminist activism to a focus on the visibility of women in the political space without putting any effort into developing feminist agendas.

Along with NAHT and No to the Oppression of Women, MANSAM was the de facto leading body representing women's issues post-revolution through direct representation in the FFC or through their participation in other initiatives or coalitions (Abbas 2022). Women and feminist bodies focused on advocating for women's representation in the political and negotiation process, and saw the civilian transition government as a natural evolution of women's critical participation in the revolution. This included the Sovereign Council, the Executive Government and the Legislative Council. However, other than weighing in on the set agenda by the FFC, little was being done by feminist organisations to develop a consensus around the agenda women would pursue during the transition period once represented.

Neoliberal Feminism in Sudan: The Making of the Representation Agenda

In the last decades, neoliberalism has defined the political landscape and the space for movement building, as well as the livelihood and welfare of citizens in much of the Global South. In essence, neoliberalism emphasises market fundamentalism advocated by scholars, policy makers and institutions. David Harvey (2007, 2) defines neoliberalism as "... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". To understand how the Sudanese feminist movements' politics were shaped by the neoliberal discourse, we draw on a more nuanced definition of neoliberalism

articulated by Fine and Saad-Filho (2017, 686) “*as a material structure of social, economic and political reproduction*”. We argue that in the democratisation process and economic direction set by the FFC-TMC transition agreement, and given the global wave of neoliberalisation in feminist politics and the institutional nature of women and feminist organisations, women pursued a deradicalised representation agenda, and by extension championed or passively accepted neoliberal economic policies detrimental to the aspirations of improved livelihoods expressed by Sudanese women in the revolution.

The making of this agenda shows the impacts of neoliberalism on the feminist movement generally, and on the Sudanese civil and political society especially, where neoliberalism can be linked to the derailment of structural demands and economic rights. Globally, Sudan is not unique. Coming out of the devastating economic impacts of SAPs, major global events such as the 1995 Beijing conference put forth a new agenda for women, based primarily on the UN human rights framework. The conference focused on strategies for women’s mobilisation around forming electoral quotas, leadership training, and promotion of women’s political participation, prioritising access to power as the main agenda (Tripp et al. 2008). Scholars such as Frasier (2017) note the “liberalisation” of feminist demands to form what Rottenberg (2014) defined as being dominated by the promotion of concepts such as individual freedom and empowerment, and the adherence to the laws of market liberalisation. Neoliberal feminism is defined as the integration of women’s equality into the economic rationale of neoliberal ideology and governance policy. In essence the replacement of collective struggle for social change with notions of self-help, entrepreneurial spirit, and psychologies of positivity produced two types of women: those able to succeed under capitalism and those exploited by capitalism (Rottenberg 2014). In neoliberal feminist discourse, representation is watered down and reinterpreted as a means of regaining control from an interventionist State and achieving freedom by participating in the free market (Leal 2007).

The choice of adopting representation as the main agenda was determined by Sudanese women’s belief that political participation and representation for women in legislative and executive bodies is a prerequisite for change in women’s status and rights. As one member of the Sudanese Women’s Union (SWU) in North Kordofan states, “... *the biggest changes we were able to achieve for women*

occurred when we elected the first women to parliament; in her view, this is a tried and tested tactic. This view, however, ignores the nature of the feminist movement at the time, its grassroots mobilisation and the political nature of the government in which these changes were enacted. More so, this approach was critiqued even during that time. The SWU, which was ideologically affiliated with the Communist party, was accused of being the wing of the patriarch (Hale 1986), prioritising only the party's political priorities and ignoring the gendered roles and burdens of care work on women.

This belief is further supported by the critical mass theory underlying mainstream consensus within liberal feminist policy-making in the aftermath of the Beijing conference: that a “critical minority” at 30% is necessary for women to have significant power and decision-making. This strategy was successfully implemented in many African countries, where representation jumped from 7,7% of women in legislative positions in 1990 to 22% in 2015 (IDEA 2023). As the utility of representation in and of itself was the sole consideration, there was no agenda to be pursued, should women be selected, and no mechanism to ensure accountability. In fact, groups or women who were perceived to be partisan or have a preference for a transformative agenda were considered to be divisive. This opinion was echoed by many of the women we interviewed, who, despite their disagreement with some of the female candidates during the transitional period, stressed that speaking out against them might undermine the already fragile position that women have in the political space.

The institutional evolution of Sudanese feminist organisations in the past decades also played a part in setting the representation agenda. Under threat of the authoritarian Bashir regime, the cost of political mobilising and organising was high, especially for women. As a result, NGOs became a safe space for women to engage in feminist organising. The professionalisation gave women a sense of stability and protection but has also resulted in concessions and dependence in agenda-making. National NGOs, including those under MANSAM, depended on funding from international donors and therefore adopted on-trend programmes associated with neoliberal development policies such as those aimed at economic empowerment through microfinance and capacity-building programmes. This dependency is a characteristic of the NGOisation of feminism, defined by Chakraborty (2021) as the co-option and erasure of critical social

movements associated with the depoliticisation of feminism itself. The features of NGOisation include institutionalisation, professionalisation, depoliticisation, and demobilisation of movements (Lang 2012).

Similarly, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue that the efforts to increase women's participation gained traction when they became an explicit goal of the United Nations Sustainable Developmental Goals and attached to more funding. In Sudan, international organisations such as UN Women and IDEA were focused on representation and political participation and provided funding for this agenda to NGOs and rights groups which adhered to this agenda despite internal preferences. A member of MANSAM told us that one of the biggest projects they implemented during the transitional period, a national-level mapping of possible candidates to be selected for the Legislative Council, was supported by UNDP/UNWOMEN. Interestingly, at the time the FFC seemed to have no interest in forming the Legislative Council, and the women's movement again seemed to be on the fringes. The role these organisations played is complex; while there was no force per se, national organisations understood that the funding channels and mandates were non-negotiable and pre-set, leaving no room for different types of projects. An employee at IDEA indicated that during initial meetings and consultation about priorities, there was consensus on representation being an end goal and very little discussion about elements of economic policy or different priorities. Another young feminist told us they were threatened with the termination of funding from an international organisation if their project did not focus on women's political empowerment. They had wanted to undertake a project related to unpaid labour and care work.

Despite their differences from mainstream feminist groups in membership, mode of organisation, and agenda, the political participation agenda (or representation) was a priority even for poor women and those from periphery and rural areas. While these women complained that their concerns were not being prioritised, they too stressed the importance of political participation, albeit by working class women. This can be attributed to the penetration of representation as a political tactic into the mainstream. Here we see that influence over agenda can be achieved through power dynamics and the perceived professionalism of the INGO-set agenda. In an agenda brainstorming exercise conducted by a prominent Sudanese feminist NGO, we witnessed the process whereby the

priorities of women were slowly streamlined to fit a representation agenda in an almost hypnotising manner; this tactic was repeated in several focus groups across eight states.

The argument about the impact of the neoliberalisation of feminism is not that there is a problem with representation as a feminist demand. Rather, it is the lack of substance, which makes the economic justice agenda almost an empty vase ready to be filled by austerity and market-centred reform, even by women who have a much higher stake in questions of economic reform. The class bias inherent in the neoliberalisation of feminism is illustrated by a comment, made by a MANSAM member and the only female representative in the FFC central committee, at a meeting organised by MANSAM aimed at gendering the FFC's plan for the transitional period, that adding a clause on the importance of paid maternity leave for domestic workers would "make our life difficult". Although the comment was said as a light joke, it embodied the class conflict being brushed aside under the slogans of women's unity.

Once selected, the design of the representation agenda by Sudanese feminist groups in the revolution adopted features to fit the model of individual exceptionalism of the technocrat official carved out by the wider political consensus and process. This meant that, as opposed to challenging the inherited hierarchical structure within the women's movement, women who held professional titles, were part of the political elite, and by extension, from middle or upper-middle-class groups, were more likely to be selected for political and executive positions (Hashim 2018).

In the absence of an agenda and by organising around the bare minimum as a unifying effort, demanding representation became the ultimate proclamation and the only goal of feminist politics. According to one interviewee, a prevailing expectation was that, prior to advocating for equality, feminists should first establish a shared agenda. This reflects a bias, wherein women are perceived as a homogenous group. Despite frustrations expressed by feminists regarding the lack of a similar directive for men to unite, this issue was not systematically contested. It is conceivable that feminists recognised the strategic value of strength in numbers against entrenched misogyny, and the numbers favoured a focus on political representation as the main agenda.

How did the Representation Agenda Perform?

The constitutional document specified that at least 40% of seats in the transitional government would be reserved for women (George et al. 2019). However, this was not realised in terms of bringing about the level of representation to 40% or ensuring a diverse representation. From the beginning of the negotiation stage, women in Khartoum expressed dissatisfaction with the civilian coalition. They felt that they were being tokenised and used as symbols of progress. Initially, two women represented women and neighbourhood committees in the negotiations, but one was later replaced by a man, leaving only the other to carry the burden of representation (Tønnessen and al-Nagar 2020). This imbalance of power inside the civilian negotiation team continued. In fact, during the negotiation between the military and the civilian group, the only female negotiator was told by one of the moderators to keep silent and called a “*little girl*”. In the government, only two women were included in the eleven-person Sovereign Council, three women were appointed heads of ministries out of 19 ministerial positions, and two women were appointed as governors in Sudan’s 18 states after the FFC’s initial list of 18 governor nominees which included no women.

Women interpreted the inability to reach the goal differently. While women in Khartoum talked about the resistance they encountered in trying to reach the set quota, women in El-Ubbayid and grassroots groups in both states were sceptical either of the feasibility of the goal or its ability to represent the “right” group of women. Women’s groups organised around livelihoods and labour issues, such as the Women’s Cooperation Union, were disappointed that the representation agenda did not include working-class women.

In our conversation with the leader of a prominent political party in El-Ubbayid, she expressed the view that the goal of 40% representation was too high, especially for women in the periphery. “*As feminists, we are not deserving of the 40%, we are still weak and don’t have the power or authority to take our rights and fight for them; that takes time. [...] Personally, I would’ve loved to say increase the representation percentage to 50% but I don’t have the confidence to demand something like that*”. This sentiment was shared by others who believed that given the long history of exclusion from leadership, women were not prepared or available to take positions within the transition period.

Upon reflection, we noted that one of the shortcomings of the representation goal was that it limited itself to “official” positions within the transitional period. In fact, based on the testimonies and sentiments of women, and on our observations, the participation of women at other levels of political life through grassroots bodies was much higher and more diverse. Women were far more active in neighbourhood committees, labour and professional unions, demand groups, and volunteer initiatives. Younger women had different concerns compared to their older counterparts interviewed. They expressed dissatisfaction with the roles assigned to them in grassroots groups and felt overqualified, unlike the older women who felt they were unqualified or lacked experience and confidence.

This is not to minimise the challenge faced by younger women in grassroots spaces. In fact, the patriarchal culture of neighbourhood committees and grassroots groups often had dangerous consequences for such young women. In one case, a young neighbourhood committee member from North Kordofan described an incident where threatening letters were sent to her home, which prompted her family to have her brother accompany her to committee meetings. Elsewhere, women who worked within the transitional government also remarked that women within the civil society nominated to work in the transitional government gave up their positions in response to instances of harassment and misogyny from male colleagues. Unfortunately, women at all levels of participation experienced intense backlash when speaking out against these cases and were accused of trying to tarnish the legacy of the revolution.

Whose Agenda?

Economic reform and women in Sudan

The first test of the commitment to economic justice came during the lockdown announced by the transitional government in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This presented a unique challenge to women due to loss of income and an already non-existent social protection system. After the announcement of the lockdown, representatives from the tea and food sellers association met with Lena Elshiekh (the Minister of Labour and Social Development) to request direct support for thousands of women in Khartoum who had lost their income during the lockdown; she in turn requested lists of

members so they could be given food hampers and cash assistance to compensate for lost income. However, a large majority of women did not receive support for the duration of the three-month lockdown (ILO 2021b). The minister also initiated the process and direction for the national social protection strategy which was essentially a continuation of social protection projects under the previous regime that focused on cash transfers and reduced welfare services. Featured was a temporary family income support project that aimed to alleviate the impact of the lifting of subsidies and mitigate other harsh economic measures.

Asha Musa, who was appointed to the Sovereign Council, nominated by the coalition of civil forces and celebrated by many given her long history of activism and experience in politics within the SWU, was criticised as inactive during her time in the Sovereign Council, or as one interviewee said “*her appointment at the Sovereign Council was like male breasts ... useless*”. A substantive criticism levelled at her was that some of her actions were often in direct conflict with pro-poor women policies and programmes, which she claimed to prioritise. One incident that was often cited to support this argument occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when she publicly reprimanded the leader of the Women’s Food and Beverage Union for accusing her of not keeping her promise to distribute support for women in the food and beverage sector who faced a particular shortage of income due to the lockdown enforced on public spaces where they worked (Mukashfi 2020).

Feminist groups including MANSAM have engaged with the economic agenda. In fact, MANSAM has a thematic group dedicated to socio-economic issues. However, their responses have also been articulated through the lens of neoliberal policy. MANSAM’s socio-economic empowerment work still primarily focuses on capacity-building for women and access to finance. Women groups uncritically accepted this neoliberal path and focused their efforts on leadership and vocational training. Even those which had a self-proclaimed leftist ideological leaning, such as the SWU branch in El-Ubbaiyd, conducted training on hand crafts and other self-help activities for women in the city. Saeed Nafsak, a self-help group whose membership is all poor, IDP women from peri-urban Khartoum, offers training on income generating activities, including soap-making and petty trading, for which funding is usually received from prominent rights organisations.

Critics of this approach challenge the ability of such programmes to remove women from the cycle of poverty and achieve social and political independence. Microcredit for microloans has not been found to alter family structures and in fact could become disempowering when credit is given over to males in the family (Burra et al. 2005). Far from benign, Weber (2006) explains how microfinance reinforces the restructuring of the market towards financial liberalisation but has failed to create an upward cycle based on saving and reinvestment. In reality, recipients of microcredit use loans for direct consumption needs due to the lack of social protection systems and may end up in cycles of debt, furthering their vulnerability.

Nonetheless, this market-oriented approach views women's economic empowerment and presents gender equality as achievable through investment in women as entrepreneurs (Cornwall 2008). The integration of gender into development has resulted in a simplification of feminist processes by focusing on supplying missing elements required for women's empowerment (leadership and business skills, micro-loans, etc.) and substituting these processes with a mechanical and depoliticised process administered by technical professionals (Benería et al. 2015). In a paper discussing the origins of empowerment and its current diversion from the understanding during the early 1990s, Cornwall (2016) gives three important insights into what was first envisioned as empowerment. Firstly, empowerment is about changing power relations; secondly, empowerment is relational; and finally, empowerment is a process and not a fixed location. Contrary to its current apolitical identity, empowerment was a political movement that challenged structures of patriarchy, class and ethnicity Batliwala (2007). Batliwala points out that empowerment was initially synonymous with political liberation groups; however, the meaning of the term evolved in the 1990s with the increased adoption of neo-liberal policies that had to be accountable to the poor, who constitute the largest voting bloc, and so had to be manageable and narrow. These policies were restricted to two areas: supporting women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship programmes, and reserving seats for women in government, which later evolved into results-driven, rights-based approaches managed by professionals such as policy experts, lawyers, and NGO personnel (Batliwala 2007).

The struggle for economic justice and the transformative power of representation

When the transitional government was appointed, the economic crisis was one of the main things it was expected to address. The government began to lay out its economic recovery plan, which predominantly mirrored structural adjustment programmes. The government signed a staff-monitored programme with the IMF, cementing its commitment to economic orthodoxy. The response to the economic reforms was not uniform. Revolutionary forces thought re-engaging with the international community and global financial markets was necessary for Sudan. The IMF and the donor community had made it clear that debt relief could not be triggered through the HIPC programme unless the reforms, especially those pertaining to commodity subsidies and currency devaluation, were put in place.

Women groups (namely MANSAM), working with UN Women, organised a conference on gendering the economy and discussed the importance of involving women. Criticism of the cash transfer programme was limited to its inadequacy to meet livelihood needs. Conceptually, there did not seem to be an understanding of the broader ideological project at the centre of cash transfers as substitutes for social protection. The main problem with cash transfer programmes is that they do not challenge or respond to the main demand of public provisioning. Instead, they depend on facilitating consumption at the subsistence level and end up integrating women into markets without protecting them from the inherent risk of volatility. More so, cash transfer programmes are usually offered in the context of austerity, which means they do not offer any solutions for structural concerns around employment and job creation to ease the dependence on such programmes. The prioritisation of market-based solutions to women's economic problems was not identified as a concern.

Discussing economic policy and economic rights is intimidating. Economics has for decades been seen as a purely technical endeavour, not to be touched by non-economists. This understanding was very strong during the discussions of the reform plans. The community engagement the government promised to do was essentially a propaganda and communication exercise aimed at fostering consensus around the reforms and leaving little room for actual dialogue. In an interview with a representative of MANSAM, we learned that

even though internally women were uncomfortable with the austerity measures and their anticipated impact on them, MANSAM did not officially denounce or reject the policies. They felt ill-equipped to do so and unprepared to express their disagreement without a ready alternative set of policies. As one young woman told us, *“we are still at the beginning of the more inclusive movement building and this divergence is discussed at the level of dialogue but has not yet translated to action and mobilisation; however, when it comes to the issue of economic policy it is even at a more elementary stage because we’re still understanding what terms like ‘gendering budgets’ mean and they are presented in very general terms that are difficult to relate to.”*

Overall, the assessment of women’s participation in the transitional government has not been positive. Through our analysis, different reasons can be adduced to explain the inability of the participation agenda to play a transformative role. To begin with, there is the underestimation of the role of organisation, political mobilisation, and institutional accountability. This was further complicated by the fact that while women were granted 40% representation, this quota was not exclusively nominated by women or feminist organisations. For instance, the governor in the Northern state was the nominee of the Sudanese Congress Party. Women we spoke to from her state claimed that the governor did not make any effort to work with women or feminist bodies and was constantly surrounded by and working with members of her party. Cornwall and Goetz (2005) support sentiment by pointing out that while the quota system has allowed for increased participation of women, this does not mean that women will advocate for explicitly women-friendly policies. They argue that while reservations are intended to give women power within their communities and political parties with the aim of increasing party majority, seats are still divided among parties because women do not operate as a stand-alone political community. This places an unfair responsibility on women who are expected to act outside of their own party’s interest.

Research also showed that when women are used merely as a means to increase political majority but receive limited political apprenticeship, it leads to their inability to act effectively in executive or legislative positions (Cornwall and Goetz 2005). This point was echoed where women felt that many lacked the skills and experience to put forth a women’s agenda once they were in prominent positions. Despite its shortcomings, one participant credited the representation

agenda with offering women an opportunity to gain experience “...most of the women had no experience, they were never leaders, they were never in high positions and now they are forced to be in this role. But this experience had to happen, and it is important for developing leadership”. This opinion is supported by Yoon (2004) who has underscored the important role leadership experience plays in increasing women’s confidence and willingness to participate in public office.

Another reason put forth for the lack of a transformative agenda is that women as a group are not homogeneous and what might be transformative for one group can be oppressive or regressive for another. Al-Badri (2005), in examining the first experience of Sudanese women’s participation in the late 1960s, shows the bias in issues championed as a representation of the priorities of urban educated women. In fact, in her research on the SWU, Hale (1986) notes the unwillingness of union members to address issues such as the increasingly rigid sexual division of labour, or to move beyond encouraging more women to enter the increasingly capitalistic public sector and work on reforms within that context. In the wake of the 2018 revolution, this conflict in priorities was again observed by women from North Kordofan in the street sellers’ movement; they felt that there was no gain to be made from a political movement spearheaded by professional women whom they often saw as aggressors or as selfish politicians. One woman in North Kordofan who works as a street seller remarked that “we don’t trust ‘professional’ working women except teachers because they are also suffering like us”. As an alternative, women street sellers built alliances with male street-seller groups and demand groups facing similar marginalisation and harassment by the State.

From our observations, the inability to generate an alternative vision was also a major shortcoming. In our discussion with a member of the cooperative’s coalition in Khartoum concerning the performance of women representatives in the transition period of civilian government, critiques were focused on the class and ethnic identity of the representatives and not their connection or accountability to the movement. Periphery grassroots groups who have prioritised the issue of livelihoods also failed at articulating tools or a transformative agenda beyond participation or the “right kind” of representation. Similarly, in North Kordofan, the Tajamua’ Alnisai, a group of mostly young women in neighbourhood committees, could not translate their self-described radical

leanings into a separate or concrete agenda for women's issues, again failing to set a baseline for measuring any sort of adherence to the cause of women or their performance besides their participation and some lip service regarding individual freedoms. Leftist women groups such as the SWU expressed an alternative economic agenda seen clearly in their coordination and coalition with other radical groups outside the feminist movement in pressing demands such as calls for free health and education, and for making reproduction an official responsibility of the State. Even the women who are active in other pressure groups that revolve around economic issues, such the anti-dam movement, do not articulate these as feminist demands.

The findings also illustrate the limitations created by the policies of the transitional government, and the limited space for reform amidst the involvement of the military and the imposition of the international community. This was apparent in an April 2021 protest organised by different feminist groups predominantly made up of younger individuals. Protest members held signs demanding women's participation in politics and the rejection of patriarchy and misogyny, but there were also signs which demanded free health and education (Nasreldin 2021). Women reported that when introducing reforms they faced pushback from both male colleagues and women in all levels of governmental and civil bodies. Young women noted during interviews that men within neighbourhood committees were not open to discussing the rights of women or other groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. Women also struggled within the transitional government to amend discriminatory laws. They have also voiced their frustration regarding the inability of the government to ratify international women's rights conventions such as CEDAW, citing cowardice and misogyny on the part of the transitional government.

Finally, the deprioritisation of economic policy was not unique to the women's movement. Other groups, such as neighbourhood committees, political parties, and civil society groups were not critically engaged with the economic reform policy proposed by the transitional government. Despite our criticism of the representation agenda due to its lack of substantive contribution to the feminist cause, we acknowledge the structural limitations which feminists have to overcome in order to exist and continue to try and articulate their stances on the questions of economic justice.

Perhaps one lesson that was learned after the October coup was that ignoring the economy and livelihood comes at a high cost. It became clear to the revolutionary movement that economic reforms have failed to address structural questions about the Sudanese economy, such as the creation and distribution of wealth and the vested interests of military, paramilitary and regional powers in Sudan's resources. After the coup, the political space narrowed, as most of the efforts went into reversing the military coup carried out by Abdelfatah Burhan, head of the Armed Forces, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo Hemedti. A different variant of political representation came into play, with neighbourhood committees leading protests and young women demanding better representation. This signifies a shift in mobilization that it is represented at a more granular level of politics, which may allow for more diverse discussions between the various groups and within the feminist movement itself.

Conclusion

Research for this paper started with the assumption that the feminist agenda was captured by Khartoum-based elite feminists and women's organisations who were imposing their own views on other women, ignoring the demands of rural and poor women regarding economic justice. This is only partly true. While the representation agenda did speak mostly to the desires of women politicians who were pushing against the patriarchal nature of popular politics, there is no grassroots feminist movement *per se*. This does not mean that rural and poor women are not aware of the centrality of their livelihood issues. However, such women experience various levels of societal and political disenfranchisement which stipulate a specific form of inclusion into feminist movements contingent on their loyalty to the centrality of representation.

We discuss how the representation agenda had the ability to unify women and was an easy thing to agree on. However, a deeper look showed that this unity was fragile and topical. The backlash on the lack of women's representation and political participation was seen as a greater threat than representation by women who held regressive economic or social positions, or at least did not ascribe to any political position. Indeed, the performance of women representatives in the transition period of the civilian government drew loud dissatisfaction from both elite women and feminist politicians, and rank-and-file members of the feminist movement. In effect, the experience called into question the role that ethnic and class differences might play in identifying agendas, and, unfortunately, created a level of mistrust and a rift between seasoned women politicians and grassroots women's groups.

Women groups, especially in Khartoum, prioritised representation as a way to feel empowered against the patriarchal processes and institutions they had to confront. However, they gave little attention to the post-representation reality. In this sense, the political participation agenda itself is not necessarily a problem. Rather, it is unclear how it leads to the realisation of economic rights across the country. The lumping together of women in the representation agenda led to the shelving of many issues that were not only important but could have been a strategic way for the women's movement to become more influential and relevant after the revolution.

Notes

1. Interviewees have requested to remain anonymous. Identification of interviewees will be coded based on state and numerical value corresponding to order of interview.
2. Cheap local types of food made from beans and lentils. Its use here is intended to signal economic disenfranchisement.
3. NAHT is the Forum of Women in Forces of Freedom and Change
4. NK03. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
5. NK04. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .25 March 2022. NK01. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .25 March 2022.
6. KH06. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 11 July 2021.
7. KH01. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 02 May 2021
8. KH03. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 22 May 2021
9. KH07. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 14 July 2021.
10. KH09. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 23 July 2021.
11. Author's Personal Notes. Khartoum. 5 October 2019.
12. KH05. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 01 July 2021
13. KH10. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 23 July 2021
14. NK02. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
15. NK08. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. El-Ubbayid. 27 March 2021
16. NK09. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. El-Ubbayid. 27 March 2021
17. KH01. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 02 May 2021

18. NK02. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid. 25 March 2022.
19. KH11. Interviewed by Author. Interview Transcript. Khartoum. 26 July 2021
20. NS01. Interviewed by Author. WhatsApp call recording. Northern State. 01 July 2022
21. NK05. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .26 March 2022.
22. NK05. Interviewed by Author. Audio Recording. El-Ubbayid .26 March 2022.
23. The use of the term “Radical” here is a verbatim translation form the Arabic word “Jizriya” which originates from a word “Jizr” meaning root. The term is associated with a faction within Sudanese civil society which is considered leftist or against incremental change and push for radical change, removing from the root.

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The End SARS Women's Coalition: Exploring the Persistence of Women's Movements through Feminist Generations

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso and Ololade Faniyi

Abstract

This article situates the #EndSARS women's activism within the broader context of Nigeria's transgenerational feminist struggles against State repression. We draw on the actions of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) of 1947, led by Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, to explore continuities evident in the work of feminists in Nigeria's protest against police brutality (and other social vices), popularly known as the *End SARS Movement* in 2020. Using in-depth interviews, a close feminist reading of activists' documentation, and data from Twitter, which was the major site of #EndSARS digital activism, we explore contemporary feminist activists' inadvertent or concerted actions that point to transgenerational continuities in Nigerian feminist activism. In doing so, we transcend studies that have investigated differences through the class/gender/generation divide in feminist movements, particularly as we tease out the points of convergence and tensions that have evolved over time in persistent efforts to break the cycle of similar oppressions.

Keywords: activism; #EndSARS; feminist generations; Nigeria; feminised corruption

Introduction

In this paper, we examine the implications and dynamics of the feminist struggle within Nigeria's End SARS movement, drawing connections to antecedents in the history of Nigerian urban middle-class women's rights activism. Our exploration begins in October 2020, coinciding with the protests against police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force established in 1992 to combat rampant robbery activities. With often-covert operations, SARS enjoyed relative autonomy, engaging in extortion, extrajudicial killings, unjust arrests, and harassment. The hashtag #EndSars emerged in late 2017 when Twitter users decried these atrocities. A viral video shared on October 3, 2020, by an eyewitness in Ughelli, Delta State, showing SARS officials shooting a young man dead and driving off with his Lexus vehicle, triggered nationwide protests across various Nigerian cities and states, including Ughelli, Lagos, Abuja, Ilorin, Kaduna, Jos, Calabar, Warri, Benin, Osun, Ibadan, Ogbomosho and Owerri.¹

We address how young middle-class Nigerian feminists of diverse ethnic descent were prominent organisers during the End SARS protests, who amplified their work in explicitly feminist terms. The Feminist Coalition (FemCo), alongside other women's rights activists, became significant rallying forces within a largely decentralised movement. FemCo, as a collective with legal, technological, journalistic, and activist literacies, capitalised upon social media and Bitcoin technologies for fundraising (Chawaga 2020). The End SARS Response Unit, liaising with FemCo, connected protesters across states, providing resources and information, including helplines and digital radio services.

Despite the criticism of the performative activism and spectacle perpetuated in digital activism (Njoroge 2016; Ofori-Parku and Moscato 2018), the End SARS movement did not simply generate spectacle but served as a unifying platform for collective action, and its impact persist even after the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on October 20, 2020, when the Nigerian Army opened fire on peaceful protesters. Although this incident temporarily halted the protests, the Lagos State Judicial Panel's report on November 15, 2021, affirmed claims made

¹ This video by this eyewitness has since been deleted from their Twitter account. We refrain from mentioning this user to protect their privacy, but several copies of this triggering video are still circulating online.

by women such as D. J. Switch and CNN reporter Stephanie Busari, who had been advocating for justice since the massacre. D. J. Switch, present at the Lekki Toll Gate, documented the shooting on Instagram Live. Although the Nigerian presidency dismissed this evidence as fake news, her account, along with the CNN documentary produced by Busari, which drew from geolocation data, on-site protester videos, and eyewitness reports, aimed to establish the truth about the massacre (Busari et al. 2020). In response, the Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, declared that CNN should be sanctioned, characterising the Lagos State Judicial Panel report as a “triumph of fake news” (Princewill 2021, para. 2).

Here, we examine a movement in Nigeria with distinct feminist agency, which evokes the history of women leading efforts for political and social rights. The involvement of young women, who capitalised on their upwardly mobile statuses and digital visibility, brought attention to this new generation of activists. The concentration of a majority of the key feminist figures in Lagos is noteworthy, given the city’s status as Nigeria’s economic and cultural hub. We observe that Lagos provides a strategic platform for activists to amplify their messages, underscoring their access to resources, educational opportunities, and networks that contribute to the sophistication of their activism. It is crucial to recognise that despite the concentration of key figures in Lagos, the End SARS movement and the “Feminists Against SARS” response were not confined to a single region. It manifested as a widespread movement across various Nigerian regions, reflecting a united effort to address the common issue of police brutality. However, the trajectory took a significant turn after the massacre at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, which marked a turning point and concluded the offline protests on October 20, 2020.

Our analysis, informed by our perspective as *acada* feminist activists, explores the participation of women in the movement who leveraged radical feminist approaches and decentralised yet coalitional structures online and offline². We highlight connections between earlier feminists and a contemporary wave of activists with high social media visibility. We assert the importance of underscoring these continuities, which align with the approach taken by scholars such as Dieng (2023) in the Senegalese context. This emphasis diverges from

² The term “acada” is a colloquial Nigerian term derived from the word “academe” to describe someone who is familiar with the academic environment of a university (Omotoso 2020, 156).

a concentration on generational divides in examining new waves of feminism, as discussed by Bawa (2018) in the Ghanaian context.

Mapping Our Approach

This paper investigates the implications and dynamics of the term “Feminists Against SARS”, delving into the emergence of this radical feminist response within the End SARS movement that specifically critiqued police brutality using explicitly feminist terms. The genesis of this term is attributed to the initial tweet by FemCo, a group committed to leveraging their social, economic, and technological capital to advocate against police brutality. The phrase not only captures the group’s radical feminist identity but also served as a rallying call for feminists both offline and online, who formed decentralised clusters united in their resistance against the State.

Key figures, including Aisha Yesufu, Rinu Oduala, Modupe Odele, and F. K. Abudu (who later formally joined FemCo), emerged alongside FemCo, contributing to the formation and spread of a “Feminists Against SARS” momentum. The research employs interviews with Rinu Oduala and Nkemakonam Cynthia Agunwa. Rinu Oduala is a 24-year-old activist and social media influencer from Lagos who emerged as one of the young women at the forefront of the movement. She is also a community organiser and project director of Connect Hub, a platform dedicated to documenting incidents of police violence and citizen interventions. Nkemakonam, who is 30 years old, is an activist working with Witness.Org. She worked closely with some of the key women of the movement, and her work primarily focuses on the critical significance of visual documentation of social movements like the End SARS protest.

Additionally, we conduct a contextual analysis of the comprehensive statement made by FemCo, as direct interviews with the Coalition were not possible. We acknowledge the tireless work of these activists and the toll it takes on their mental and physical health and respect their abstinence from direct interviews, which we attribute to the accusations of corruption, discrimination, and unwanted attention against them, even two years after the protests (Faniyi and Omotoso 2022). As participant observers of the online digital cluster affiliated with the phrase “Feminists Against SARS”, we incorporate

our understanding of this context into our analysis, to develop a contextually specific nuanced examination of the movement. Finally, a close feminist reading of Twitter data is employed, exploring the transgenerational continuity of women's rights activism and contemporary feminist activism. Users online were observed making connections to historical movements, specifically referencing FemCo and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), providing a multifaceted understanding of the movement's broader historical and socio-political context. Through these varied methodologies, this research aims to illuminate the complexities of the "Feminists Against SARS" movement and its connections to broader narratives of women's rights activism in Nigeria.

Theoretically, our paper draws on an intersectional perspective to understand the intertwined dynamics of class, gender, and generation (Dieng 2023). In the context of Senegal, Dieng adopts intersectionality to examine how innovations in protest strategies, including radical politics and new technologies, have allowed activists to overcome generational and ideological divides within feminist movements and resist alliances between patriarchal and political powers. Notably, approximately 40 years after the inception of Yewwu Yewwi, a prominent feminist movement, Senegalese feminists are returning to radical feminist organising. Dieng explores the historical division between women's rights protests and feminist protests, the former having emerged due to a hesitation to embrace the feminist label. Women's movements initially focused on the political, social, and economic empowerment of women within the framework of national liberation, while feminist movements, particularly as exemplified by Yewwu Yewwi, have taken a more radical and intersectional approach.

Collins and Bilge describe intersectionality as an analytical tool that allows us to see that in any time and society, the power relations of these identity categories are not "discreet and mutually exclusive entities but rather build on each other and work together; and that, while often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world" (2020, 1). Rooted in the Black feminist, legal and critical race theory of Crenshaw (1989), the analytical lens of intersectionality is globally translatable, evident in the work of people across locations who had been speaking to the intersecting effects of social divisions outside of the Western origins of the term, such as African feminist scholar Molaria Ogundipe. Ogundipe (1994) coined Stiwanism (Social Transformation in

Africa Including Women), to offer a contextual specific reading of the intersecting factors affecting African women and the ways they react to these structures, including “oppression from outside; traditional structures; her backwardness; man; her colour and race; and herself” (Ogundipe 1994, 28).

The paper poses critical questions about the significance of young middle-class women emerging as central political figures in defining moments such as the End SARS movement, within the historical context of middle-class women-led anti-colonial actions. It explores the various forms of capital, including social, technical, political, legal, and digital visibility, that amplify the work of feminist activists, as well as the strategies employed to advance their work. The research also investigates the implications when corruption is weaponised against feminist activists. Ultimately, the paper aims to illustrate how Nigerian contemporary feminist activists navigates the intersecting axes of gender, class, and generation as these shape their politics while maintaining autonomy and resisting co-optation by political forces, even in the face of discrimination from State and citizen actors.

Feminists Against SARS

FemCo is a collective of 14 young feminists including Kiki Mordi, Ozzy Etomi, Fakhriyyah Hashim, Ayodeji Osowobi, Odunayo Eweniyi, Laila-Johnson Salami, F. K. Abudu and more. Beyond FemCo, Nigerian Muslim activist Aisha Yesufu, media strategist Rinu Oduala, and lawyer Modupe Odele, also emerged as the key activists in the End SARS movement. Aisha Yesufu became a recognisable figure in women’s organising after co-founding the #BringBackOurGirls movement following the kidnapping of over 250 girls by Boko Haram in 2014. This movement established the first wave of transnational feminist connections with hashtags emerging from Nigeria (Faniyi et al. 2023). Yesufu’s iconic image, showing her raised fist in protest, gained widespread traction on social media. This veiled Muslim woman boldly stood at the forefront, resisting the State, particularly noteworthy in environments where religious and patriarchal citizens often promote political conservatism. When we spoke to Rinu, she confirmed that each #EndSARS woman activist became a rallying voice through active participation in offline and online spaces, each with self or collective missions to

demand cultural and political change while acknowledging other activists whose work intersected with theirs.



Figure 1: Snapshot capturing Aisha Yesufu onsite during #EndSARS protest actions in Abuja.

Source: Twitter

Note: The identity of the photographer is unknown. This image is publicly available on Twitter.

Several of the founding members of FemCo were already involved in Nigerian feminist activist work prior to the coalition's formation. These include Kiki Mordi, Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, and Fakhriyyah Hashim. Osowobi, for example, is known for her work against sexual violence in Nigeria through the "Stand to End Rape" initiative. Mordi led an undercover team of journalists for a documentary on the power of male university lecturers at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana and the sexual abuse experienced by

female students at their hands; it was aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on November 29, 2019³. Meanwhile, Hashim created the hashtag #ArewaMeToo in Northern Nigeria in November 2019, as a variation of the #MeToo movement. This brought attention to gender-based violence and led to a series of offline protests across states in Northern Nigeria, including Kano and Bauchi. These women were not new to activism; they had been resisting State oppression through their work as writers, journalists, and activists.

In this paper, we consider the decentralised yet collaborative involvement of women who collectively stood against police brutality as illustrative of an “End SARS Women’s Coalition”. Nkem, when asked about the significance of the middle-class status of most of these women, emphasised that their importance lay not solely in their class status but also in their youth, technological proficiency, and social media influence. They were able to engage critically with issues affecting women and to use their resources to support protesters. Even when the Nigerian government blocked their website and channels for donations, FemCo found ways to motivate donors to use VPN and Bitcoin technologies, ultimately raising the equivalent of US\$388,000 over a two-week period (Nwankwor and Nkereuwem, 2020).

Nkem further argues that the intention of the women of End SARS was not to speak for others but for themselves. However, their agential capabilities positioned them as inadvertent spokeswomen for the majority. This resonates with Akwugo Emejulu’s (2017) concept: feminism of the 99% (F99) - a form of grassroots, down-top structured mobilising that takes into account multiple facets of women’s experiences. She particularly argues that feminism of the 99% replicates a feminist vision of politics with continuities of redistribution, intersectionality, collaboration and pro-diversity. Rinu, however, explicitly announced that she was not middle-class but rather a lower-class young woman. Although her digital capital might have made her seem privileged, Rinu detailed her lower-class childhood background and emphasised her use of social media capabilities and offline protest actions to disrupt the typical narrative of an individual saviour or face for a movement that profoundly affected many people on the margins.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we-F0Gi0Lqs>

In a collective statement titled “In Our Own Words”, published on Medium, members of FemCo recounted what led to their involvement in the End SARS movement.

On October 9, going through social media like everyone else we were upset at the violence unarmed citizens were facing at the hands of police, especially as that same day a woman was shot in the face by a police officer — and we believed that without structure, the protests could turn violent and women would be the most affected... The women in the group all agreed and we set a one hour meeting for 9pm WAT/ 8pm GMT on October 9 to strategise and organise... The meeting ended up running for 2 hours and the conclusion at the end was clear. We would help crowdsource donations for the peaceful End SARS protests. Focusing on food, water, medical, legal aid etc. (FemCo 2020)

Although FemCo’s involvement in the movement seemed sudden, they had actually formed the coalition in July 2020 with a mission to advance gender equality in Nigeria, focusing on education, financial freedom, and representation in public office. The coalition emerged from their radical care group “Whine and Wine Nigeria” where they publicly shared videos and pictures of themselves dancing and drinking wine, performing acts of joy and relaxation as a form of defiance and agency (Faniyi and Omotoso 2022, 55).

Lawyer Modupe Odele also tweeted that her primary strength was legal reform and offered to assist any groups working towards disbanding SARS: “My main strength is legal reform. If there are any groups working on providing the government with a roadmap to disbanding SARS, please do let me know. #EndSARS #EndSarsProtests” (@Moechievous 9 October 2020). Her tweet positioned her as one of the most prominent lawyers working to aid detained protesters during the peak of offline protest actions between October 9 and October 20, 2020.

During our conversation with Rinu, she expressed how the feeling of togetherness with other women helped alleviate the pain and trauma of their work as activists during the movement. Maintaining that “Nigeria women had been primed for fighting”¹ and resisting the State, Rinu remarked that her involvement in End SARS was motivated by the killing of twelve-year-old Tina Ezekwe by a drunken policeman in June 2020. She described her childhood experiences

in Lagos, where it was commonplace for SARS officials to beat up young men or leave dead bodies on the streets. Nkem's reason for involvement was simple: "It was time to rescue my generation and end police violence on our bodies"².

In the following sections, we draw on the points of convergence and divergence to which we became sensitised through participant/observer interactions online during the End SARS movement. We explore the significance of transgenerational continuities in the context of the radical feminist politics of the women of End SARS, as we unpack why users online were making connections to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the AWU, providing a multifaceted understanding of the movement's broader historical and socio-political context.

The End SARS Women's Coalition and Continuities in Nigerian Feminist Movements

We came across a tweet in which the user @julietkego connected the labour and backlash encountered by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and her cohorts in 1946 to the experiences of FemCo during the End SARS movement, as both involved women in resistance against the State:⁴

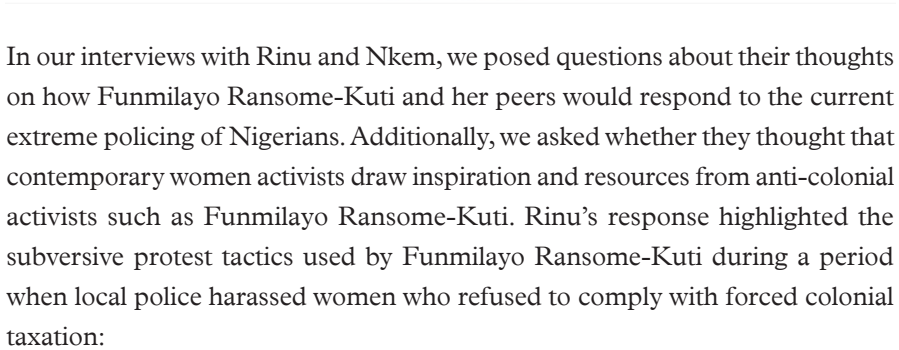
In mid-October 1946, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti led nearly 1000 women in a march to the palace to protest tax increase. The response from the colonial authorities was brutal. They deployed tear gas and administered beatings on the women. October 2020, @feminist_co #EndSars

@julietkego, who is the co-founder of the social enterprise Whole Woman Network and identifies as a Social Justice Advocate and International Speaker-Poet, demonstrates in this tweet a powerful historical context for the 2020 feminist momentum.⁵ The image below depicts a Twitter network graph generated on Gephi, showing the mentions of Ransome-Kuti in the #EndSARS movement. We argue that these connections drawn on this digital platform serve as a bridge between historical struggles and current activism. The retweets illustrate how users recognise the lineage of Nigerian women leading protests, emphasising a shared history of resilience and resistance that not only demonstrates the

⁴ The context of this work predates the transformation of Twitter to "X", so we retain terms describing Twitter's conversational features.

⁵ We have mentioned @julietkego here because of the context and intended public audience of her tweet.

Figure 2: Visualisation of “Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti” and #EndSars mention network between October 10 and October 20, 2020, generated through Gephi. It represents users, hashtags, and keywords, and establishes connections between Ransome-Kuti and #EndSARS. Generated by Ololade Faniyi



I draw inspiration from Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Aba women fighting against colonial oppression...Nigeria is a country of influential women who have been central to movements for change... FRK was dubbed the lioness of Lisabi, and she and AWU staged long vigils outside the Alake's palace and when they refused them the right to protest, they

changed to festivals and picnics. She resisted the local police and taught women (how to deal with the police force) when tear gas canisters were thrown at them. They used their money to fund legal representation. They protested, they wrote, their entire lives were dedicated to protesting³.

In the specific context of the AWU, we note how this anti-colonial women's activism was sustained by the collective power of women working together through decided coalitions. In 1947, Eniola Soyinka, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Amelia Osimosu and several other women who were part of the Abeokuta Ladies Club, formed a coalition with Abeokuta market women's association to resist the unfair treatment of women in Egbaland. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, dubbed the "lioness of Lisabi", presided over the outcome of this alliance known as Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU). The more upwardly mobile women had planned to leverage their education and middle-class privileges to provide literacy classes for the mostly unlettered market women. However, Ransome-Kuti became aware of the harassment market women faced from tax officials and local police, including the confiscation of their goods. When the colonisers imposed the poll taxes, sanitation fines, market, and trade-related taxes, including indirect taxes such as market fees and market-shed fees in 1918, all remitted to the colonial treasury, Egba women were accessed and taxed differently because the officials perceived them as wealthy women, highlighting what Byfield refers to as "gendered inconsistencies in colonial policies" (2016, 108). In response to this unfair taxation, they began organising a series of protests, culminating in their victory in December 1948, including the temporary abolition of taxes on women and the exile of the complicit ruler, Alake Ademóla (Byfield 2016).

The victory of the AWU led to the publication of a small pamphlet titled "The Fall of a Ruler or The Freedom of Egbaland." In this pamphlet, they connected their words with famous quotes from Thomas Jefferson, Lord Acton, and Charles James Fox that defined the Declaration of American Independence. The women were aware that these American forefathers did not necessarily include women in their constitution of democracy. Still, by appropriating their words in the context of the oppression of market women in Egbaland, the women of AWU insisted that women be treated as full and legitimate political subjects, for whom "nationalism and gender equality in the political arena were inseparable" (Byfield 2016, 120). The alliance between the Abeokuta Ladies

Club and the market women's association blurred the barriers of difference: "The fight of Egba women knew no religious barriers. Christians, Moslems, (Yoruba Indigenous Traditionalists) had joined hands to put an end to long-standing wrongs" (Byfield 2016, 55).

The successes of the AWU led to the beginning of a broader movement, with the founding of the National Women's Union (NWU) in 1949 (Mba 1982; Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997). Through NWU's widespread branches across Nigeria, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti aimed to unite women's organisations and present a unified set of issues to the newly formed political parties. Ransome-Kuti and the NWU organised a parliament of the women of Nigeria (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997; Byfield 2012) in August 1953, leading to the establishment of the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies (FNWS). These collectives situated gender critique within both local and national issues, challenging poll taxes and advocating for a reduction in bride prices. Ransome-Kuti was also involved in national politics, being a founding member of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the only woman in a group of seven. As NCNC transformed into a political party and as political parties gained prominence in the 1950s, there was pressure on civic organisations, including the NWU, to align themselves with such parties. However, Ransome-Kuti resisted this pressure, attempting to maintain the independence of women's organisations as spaces where women from all political affiliations could gather and learn from each other while disavowing the singular attention to women for their sheer voting power as opposed to their political subjectivity. This stance faced challenges, with Margaret Ekpo resigning from NWU and FNWS in 1954, citing that these organisations were at odds with the politics of the NCNC (Byfield 2012). However, Ransome-Kuti's insistence on the independence of women's organisations reflected her disidentification with the evolution of nationalist politics in Nigeria, which delegitimised women candidates and reinforced the notion that women are mere political cheerleaders whose votes will ascend men into power. Her dissatisfaction eventually caused her to leave the NCNC in 1959, prompting her to form her own political party, the Commoner People's Party.

Although these anti-colonial women's rights activists did not have digital media to produce visibility for their actions in the way contemporary feminist activists do, the politics of self-representation was still crucial to them. For

Ransome-Kuti, these politics enabled her to leverage her middle-class privileges to aid lesser privileged market women through literacy classes, as well as organise to protect them from unjust taxation and local police harassment. In addition, this manifested in her efforts to unite women and present their consolidated issues to political parties, from a truly independent organisation composed of women across political affiliations. In the following sections, we delve into a thematic analysis of the nuances that emerged in this transgenerational continuity from AWU to FemCo.

The Politics of Terminology and Ideological Independence

“Feminists Against SARS” was the phrase with which FemCo announced their struggle against police brutality on October 9, 2020. This phrase served as more than a simple declaration of intent; it became a potent catalyst for a broader discourse on feminist resistance against police brutality. By capturing a radical feminist identity, it not only defined FemCo’s stance but also inspired a rallying call for feminists both offline and online. The significance of this phrase was in its ability to influence the articulation of grievances related to police brutality in explicitly feminist terms, elevating the discourse beyond general opposition to feminists’ relation to police violence.

Figure 3: Screenshot of initial tweet by FemCo, announcing their End SARS activism.

Source: @feminist_co, October 9, 2020, https://x.com/feminist_co/status/1314693500013862912



This emphasis on feminist terminology addresses a concern raised by Faniyi et al (2023), who explored the implications of an uncritical approach and affective opposition to women's experiences of police violence. This not only overgeneralises men's experiences but also contributes to societal apathy towards police violence specifically targeting women in gendered ways. This gendered police violence is evident in events such as #JusticeforTina and #AbujaPoliceRaidonWomen (also referred to as #SayHerNameNigeria). #JusticeforTina emerged after a trigger-happy drunk policeman shot and killed a twelve-year-old playing in her backyard while #AbujaPoliceRaidonWomen responded to the arrest and in-custody sexual assault of up to 70 women unjustly apprehended in an Abuja nightclub and paraded as prostitutes (Faniyi et al. 2023). These, alongside other individualised events, underscore the urgency of framing discussions on police

violence in explicitly feminist terms, avoiding the oversimplification that could undermine the gendered aspects of such incidents.

Therefore, the rallying call “Feminists Against SARS” extended its influence beyond the core members of FemCo. Feminists online and allies, who identified with the struggles against police brutality, adopted the phrase and FemCo’s logo as symbols of their commitment to feminist ideals. In their statement, FemCo shared that this logo, created by Google Developer Expert, while FemCo founding member, Ire Aderinokun incorporated the feminist fist, historically used to represent struggles for gender equality, as a way to “symbolise the fact that [they were] a women’s rights organisation” (para 33). FemCo also asserts that the unexpected widespread adoption of the logo, not only by men but also by women who may have been hesitant to openly identify with feminism, marks a significant and transformative moment for the collective.

This adoption not only demonstrated a widespread resonance but also showcased the power of the politics of naming in shaping a collective identity. The movement’s decentralised nature did not diminish its impact; instead, it enabled the wilful unity of voices under a shared banner, emphasising the intersectionality of feminist activism within the broader context of anti-police brutality protests in Nigeria. Moreover, the utilisation of social media, particularly Twitter, played a pivotal role in amplifying the reach of “Feminists Against SARS”, fostering a virtual community of feminists committed to the cause. As this phrase echoed across digital spaces, it not only symbolised resistance but also sparked conversations on the interconnectedness of feminist struggles with broader societal and nationalist issues.

Figure 4: Images publicly available on Twitter, showing unidentified Nigerian protesters in London holding placards displaying the logo of FemCo.

Source: Twitter. Note: The identity of the photographer is unknown.



FemCo's commitment to using explicit feminist terminology, we argue, echoes the legacy of ideological independence reminiscent of figures like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. Much like Ransome-Kuti, who resisted aligning women's organisations with political parties during the anti-colonial struggle, FemCo maintains an ideological independence by framing their activism against police brutality in clear feminist terms. These parallel approaches underscore a continuity in the pursuit of autonomy and the assertion of a distinct feminist perspective in addressing systemic issues, drawing a vital connection between the historical roots of anti-colonial feminism and contemporary feminist movements.

Ethics of Vigour Born Out of Radical Care

We identified ethics of radical care in the transgenerational continuity of women's rights and feminist movements in Nigeria. This form of care, as defined by Faniyi and Omotoso (2022), is radically attentive to self and the collective, "especially in contexts where activists face violent backlash, harassment, criminal, and other state penalties for their work" (51). We characterise the actions of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti as radical care – an embodiment of the several aspects of her

activism, including the expansion of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) to include market women, the transformation of protests into picnics, and the protective measures taken to shield women from the impact of tear gas. By expanding the AWU to include women from different backgrounds, Ransome-Kuti demonstrated a caring ethos by fostering solidarity among women of various social classes. This underscored a concern for the well-being and safety of the women involved in this resistance to the State. Ransome-Kuti's approach of "radical care" thus signalled a nuanced and effective strategy in the face of challenging circumstances.

In the contemporary context, FemCo similarly engages in subversive actions rooted in radical care. FemCo's advocacy was demonstrated through funding support, feeding and watering protesters, covering medical and legal expenses, and providing mental health support. This, we argue, aligns with the broader strategies of radical care in the face of threats and State penalties for their activist work. Nkem suggests that during the initial stages of the protests, participants from diverse socioeconomic classes joined the movement. Notably, lower-income individuals were drawn in, in part, by the provision of food and entertainment, highlighting the significance of these elements in attracting a broader audience. While some might have only turned up for the entertainment and spectacle the protests provided, this did not undermine the substantive impact of the movement. The class realities of those attending offers us profound insights into Nigeria's systemic oppressions. Although food initially motivated attendees, their sustained engagement reflected a growing awareness and solidarity with other protesters. It emphasised their commitment to the transformative objectives of the movement and recognition of systemic challenges in Nigeria.

In the following excerpt extracted from their collective statement, FemCo explicitly addresses the significant reliance placed on them by End SARS protesters, highlighting how this widespread dependence influenced their approach to radical care. Rooted in what Omotoso (2017, 2023) describes as an ethics of vigour, their care praxis encompasses equal consideration of community management, justice, risk, and control. This commitment is exemplified through their active involvement in crowdfunding for essential provisions such as food, water, medical and legal aid. Facing restrictions on their funding channels imposed by the government, FemCo demonstrated resilience by turning to unconventional

methods such as Bitcoin, showcasing their strength by “entrenching justice in care processes” (Omotoso 2017, 70).

We had started, and people were counting on us. Over the week of October 11, 2020, we dedicated all our days to various aspects of FemCo — managing our social media, verifying protests through direct messages, handling financial responsibilities, and establishing connections with legal networks. Collaborating with other organizations like End SARS Response, Legal Aid Network, and Food Coven, we diligently worked toward our shared objectives.

Since our October 22 statement, we have remained true to our commitments: contributing funds for medical support to End SARS Response (₦20,114,087.25), mental health assistance to #EndSARSMentalHealthSupport (₦6,121,678.73), and allocating funds to the Legal Aid Network (₦15,741,459.59). Following months of research, we have successfully donated ₦500,000 each to approximately 70 victims of police brutality and the families of the deceased, amounting to almost ₦35 million (Feminist Coalition 2020 para 25).

Identity Disinformation

The End SARS movement represented a watershed moment for contemporary feminist activism in Nigeria, where feminists emerged as the faces of one of the country’s largest collective actions. While the movement aimed to end police brutality and systemic corruption, it also exposed the complex challenges and risks that feminist activists face in Nigeria. Notably, these activists had public feminist identities, which made them vulnerable to disinformation and accusations of corruption. On October 31, 2020, FemCo activist Kiki Mordi tweeted, “2020 was the year the word feminist was on the front pages of mainstream Nigerian newspapers, and it wasn’t an insult”, showing a moment of reflexivity 11 days after the Lekki Massacre. However, the popularity of the word “feminist” at that time, largely due to the work of FemCo, did not prevent the vitriol that often accompanies radical politics of naming and self-representation for feminist activists in Nigeria. Nkem describes this gender disinformation as reflecting the rage of men who felt threatened that the seeming collective acceptance of feminism would disrupt the existing power system: “They demonised feminists

by claiming they were hijacking the movement to enrich themselves” (Nkem 31 May 2022). Nkem also maintained that digital media amplified women’s stories and labour, but it also exposed them to trolls and mobs who wanted to undermine their work. She further suggested that the government made a coordinated effort to disrupt the movement.

In their statement, FemCo assert how their work was particularly met with vitriol from certain individuals on Twitter who sought to spread disinformation about their objectives and identity:

While the support from global figures was encouraging, we had our fair share of trolls on Twitter — men determined to spread misinformation about who we are and what we stand for. You know who they are, you saw their vitriol. We strongly believe being called cultists, witches, insurgents, lipstick terrorists and being blamed for sponsored violence (when ALL our efforts were focused on the peace and safety of all Nigerians) was not only damaging, but dangerous. This put our safety at risk and encouraged the intimidation and bullying we endured for weeks from various authorities (para 28).

They explained that in the events after the Lekki Massacre, organisations that were formerly supportive of their work severed ties with them: “Ayodeji described it as feeling as though fighting injustice was a crime in itself. She experienced being bullied by organisations she was affiliated with, with demands that she desist [from] any engagement with FemCo (Feminist Coalition 2020 para 29).”

Rinu asserted that what she was most afraid of during that period was not the consequences of the State or the vitriol but the threat of erasure, as she recalled how Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is often reductively presented as the first woman to drive a car in Nigeria, with little to no mention of her crucial work for Nigeria’s independence alongside celebrated male heroes of the past. This motivated her to establish the Connect Hub collective to continue advancing police reform, which she describes as a digital referral platform for cases of “police brutality, extortion, extrajudicial killings and harassment issues in Lagos” (Rinu 7 October 2022).

Furthermore, in Nigeria, engaging in feminist work that challenges the interests of the State comes with tensions and risks. Women who do such work often experience double attacks from security agencies and online male mobs

who are apathetic to gendered experiences of police brutality faced by women. Rinu attested to her traumatic experiences during the movement, the threats targeted at her family, the seizure of her accounts by the government and the ceaseless online trolling that continues to date. FemCo also revealed the paranoia of being targeted by security agencies:

For Dami, seeing her close family members panic every time she picked up her phone or relayed a new update to them was extremely heartbreaking. Jola had to fight off feelings of crippling paranoia and anxiety, so as not to panic her parents. Ozzy recalls times when she thought in horror she may never see her son again (para 24).

We have refrained from detailing the extent of vitriol in this article in an attempt to avoid fuelling concerted, purposeful and harmful tactics that undermine women's labour and agency.

The Threat of Feminised Corruption

Omotoso (2023) introduced the concept of “feminised corruption” among female political office holders in a paper that explored trends in the representation of women political subjects, which typify them as corrupt. This portrayal, according to Omotoso, makes more women visible among the corrupt in political spaces and “turns back to weaponise corruption against women” (10). FemCo activists including Kiki, Ayodele, Ozzy and F. K. Abudu emerged as political subjects through the transnational media space, despite not holding any political office. They gained visibility through social media before national traditional media began to spotlight them. However, they were drawn into a cycle that further expanded the utility of digital networks to feminise corruption, especially the misogynistic use of media to discourage women from venturing into politics and social movement organising. They were accused of lacking accountability and using the protest to amass wealth and embezzle funds, even after audit statements were released to the public (Feminist Coalition 2021).

As our interviewees affirmed, organisers of FemCo are indeed upwardly mobile women making strategic decisions, but there were also young women who had family members who depended on them at the same time that the Nigerian protesting collective counted on them. On the one hand, Patricia McFadden

had over two decades ago cautioned feminists about taking up responsibilities of self and State, as the lines between “responsibilities which men must assume, and especially men who traffic in the state” (McFadden 1997, 25) are subsumed under female nurturing tasks. On the other hand, Byfield (2012) underscores the strategic use of motherhood as a political platform by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, in the context of a cable to HRM Queen Elizabeth II on “behalf of millions of Nigerian mothers and children (who) protest vehemently against French Government’s decision to test atomic bombs in [the] Sahara” (4). Ransome-Kuti emphasised the belief that women, specifically mothers, are well-prepared for political engagement due to their roles in nurturing citizens with values such as kindness, selflessness, and a commitment to progress. Asserting that managing a home effectively is synonymous with leading a full-fledged life as a citizen in one’s country, she argued that the qualities instilled in women through motherhood made them ideal politicians. She defined citizenship not only as being born in a certain location but also as contributing positively to one’s community enabled by qualities of patience, love, and sagacity which she argued that women possess. While a surface interpretation might suggest Ransome-Kuti’s conservative view of women’s societal roles, she subverted this logic (Byfield 2012). Instead of using this rhetoric as a delimiting biological determinist force to confine women to domestic spaces, she argued that these particular values that women possess were necessary for Nigerian politics. She further critiqued male leaders in Nigeria, accusing them of distorting the true meaning of politics through imprudence and dishonourable dealings.

Drawing from this backdrop, we interpret the maternal and larger familial ties of End SARS Women’s Coalition as further underscoring the multifaceted nature of their engagement, as they carried the weight of familial and national dependence. This duality mirrors the intricate balance that mothers, as articulated by Ransome-Kuti, navigate between personal responsibilities and societal contributions. While Ransome-Kuti argued that it was this specific experience and values that made women honorary political subjects, the people who weaponised corruption at the expense of the coalition seemed oblivious to this fact. Therefore, we interpret FemCo’s final definitive statement, *In Our Own Words : The Feminist Coalition*, as one final act of labour for the movement and a radical act of life writing against claims of feminised corruption. They

addressed the matter by themselves, after several instances of being spoken for by detractors, including the press. As Omotoso (2023) suggests that women use tools necessary to survive and thrive within mediated spaces, we spotlight the tech-savviness of the FemCo activists that enables their critical survival and resistance to the scourge of feminised corruption:

We realised restrictions had been placed on the Nigerian bank accounts we were using and our payment link with Flutterwave was deactivated... People often ask us, why Bitcoin? As a group of tech-savvy women, some who work in the crypto industry, across fintech and also invest in crypto assets, Bitcoin was a no-brainer. It came naturally to us because of the many use cases and advantages: remittance, cross-border payments, privacy and transparency to name a few (Feminist Coalition 2020 para 25).

Despite the challenges and consequences faced by women activists during the movement, through their actions, many women who were previously hesitant to associate themselves with feminism felt empowered to do so. According to FemCo, that was a pivotal moment for them. In the words of Buky Williams (Mohammed et al. 2022), “it just showed what feminist organising looked like in ways that Nigerians had not respected or seen as beneficial to them”. Rinu also emphasised that this period showed that the phenomenon of women fighting against State oppression and police brutality was not occurring in a vacuum. Rather, it was indicative of a broader continuity in which women’s organising and mobilising have been recurring features of numerous struggles against various forms of oppression.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the transgenerational characteristics of Nigerian feminist activism. We engaged with Dieng's intersectional perspective to understand the intertwined dynamics of class, gender, and generation. By doing so, we identified points of convergence and similar patterns of organising which have become more pronounced over time, despite evident tensions and risks in Nigeria's feminist social movements. These include a persistent pursuit of specified goals, conscious networking across classes, and a desire for a strong feminist identity. These findings were substantiated within concepts of radical care, ethics of vigour and feminised corruption. The centrality of communication is also evident transgenerationally, with feminisms both old and new enacting a genealogy of activist resistance hinged on intentional documentation in their own words, through pamphlets and digital media, to challenge misrepresentation and disinformation. Overall, our analysis demonstrates how the work of #EndSARS feminist activists, although now carried out with digital tools, reveals a continuum of women resisting oppressive structures similar to those experienced by feminist activists of the colonial past.

Notes

1. Oduala, Rinu. Zoom interview. 7 October 2022.
2. Agunwa, Nkemakonam Cynthia. Zoom interview. 31 May 2022
3. Oduala, Rinu. Zoom interview. 7 October 2022.

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Namibia's #ShutItAllDown and Contemporary Feminist Tactics: Social Media, Transgressive Practices, and Feminist Collaboration in the 2020 Protests

Martha Ndakalako

Abstract

This article considers how the 2020 #ShutItAllDown feminist protests elucidate contemporary Namibian feminist activist culture in contrast to earlier generations of Namibian feminist activism. The protests sprung up among youth (particularly women) mostly under 25 years old, a demographic with little political influence and traditional cultural power. Thus, the organisers used strategic, transgressive disruption along with social media as fundamental to their activism. Given Namibia's historically active and varied feminist and gender activist landscape, the absence of older women and feminist activists (with the exception of Sister Namibia) at these protests is noteworthy. This article asks: how does this absence speak to contemporary Namibian feminist activist culture? what role did social media play in facilitating the dynamic movement that #ShutItAllDown became? how is this movement situated in the context of contemporary transnational and global feminist and hashtag protests? I use mixed methodologies for understanding the movement; along with excavating online spaces, I draw from informal discussions and interviews conducted in 2022 with young and older Namibian women activists. I conclude that while the #ShutItAllDown movement is emblematic of a generational divide in protest practices between contemporary feminist activists and those of previous generations, the acts of solidarity and collaboration between this movement and Sister Namibia, facilitated by social media, are reflective of a culture of feminist solidarity practices between Namibia's early feminist organisations and the contemporary groups, despite the generational divide. Furthermore, the use of social media in conjunction with disruptive protest resonated with contemporary

transnational and global hashtag protest practices, effectively drawing attention to the movement nationally and across the continent.

Keywords: hashtag feminisms; disruptive protest practices; Namibian feminisms

Introduction

This article considers how the 2020 #ShutItAllDown Namibian feminist protests elucidate contemporary Namibian feminist activist culture in contrast to earlier generations of Namibian feminist activist practice. I consider the role social media and online activism played in the dynamic movement that #ShutItAllDown became, and how these sites connect the movement to transnational and global feminist protests more broadly. This almost completely youth-led (ages 15-25) protest of women, queer and non-binary people, and men, is currently considered the largest protest movement in post-independence Namibia, with approximately 1,500-2,000 people participating in Windhoek alone. Given Namibia's historically active and varied feminist and gender activist landscape, the general absence of older women and feminist activists at these protests is noteworthy (Sister Namibia, the nation's longest-standing feminist organisation, was an exception). Accordingly, this project asks: what does this absence reveal about contemporary Namibian feminist activist culture? what role did social media play in facilitating the dynamic movement that #ShutItAllDown became? how is this movement situated in the context of contemporary transnational and global feminist and hashtag protests? Like other contemporary African social media feminist movements, #ShutItAllDown is inherently transmedial and globally connected and thus requires mixed methodologies for understanding it. The movement has been extensively documented online on social media platforms and in interviews recorded on YouTube, podcasts, and online newspapers and magazines. #ShutItAllDown's digitality—as it came about through Twitter and as it is archived online—highlights the significance of online spaces as sites of research for contemporary activist movements. Equally significant are people's perceptions beyond the curated sites of social media, which give on-the-ground contexts of the protests and movement. Thus, along with excavating online spaces, I draw from informal discussions and interviews conducted in 2022 with

young and older Namibian women activists, and women from the community regarding the movement.

Using these methodologies, this article begins by providing an overview of the movement's beginnings and situates it within the broader context of global hashtag movements also occurring that year to highlight the significant role of social media activism for #ShutItAllDown. I historicise the movement within 21st-century African feminisms and the significance of Internet 2.0 for contemporary feminist activism. I discuss the use of social media in marking a generational divide in Namibian feminist practices with attention to the way in which the leaders of the movement theorise their use of social media. I demonstrate how Sister Namibia Magazine's 2020 move to exclusively online spaces facilitated cross-generational collaboration between the movement and the magazine. I consider the protesters' use of transgressive protest tactics and the turn away from respectability politics and situate these choices within broader transgressive protest tactics across the continent. I position #ShutItAllDown within local and southern African contemporary gender/feminist activist culture and cross-generational and political feminist solidarity practices in those instances. I show that while the #ShutItAllDown movement is emblematic of a generational divide in protest practices between contemporary protesters and the feminist activists of previous generations in Namibia, the acts of solidarity and collaboration-between this movement and Sister Namibia, facilitated by social media, are reflective of feminist solidarity practices between Namibia's early feminist organisations and the contemporary groups, that bridge the generational differences in activist practices. Furthermore, the use of social media in conjunction with disruptive protest gave the movement visibility that it may not have received otherwise, and links it to contemporary transnational and global hashtag protest movements that rely on the Internet and social media to extend their influence socially and politically.

It was a hot early October Tuesday in 2020 when the police found the body of 22-year-old Shannon Wasserfal in a shallow grave in the dunes of the coastal town of Walvis Bay; this discovery sparked protests across Namibia, most of which were organised under the hashtag ShutItAllDown. When Shannon Wasserfal went missing six months earlier, on April 9th, her family and friends kept her name and image in the public view, giving interviews and posting on

social media. This publicity was in turn picked up by gender activists online and shared under #bringshannonhome (Madia et al. 2022, 117). After the police discovered her body on October 5, this prolonged media campaign to keep Shannon in the public national consciousness translated into protests and marches mourning Shannon and decrying the police's inability to effectively address gender-based violence. Protests occurred across the nation, starting as early as October 6 in the coastal towns of Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. Marchers expressed their frustration at the quotidian nature of this kind of violence toward women, chanting "Ons Is Moeg [We Are Tired]"; "Justice for Shannon"; and "Shut It Down" (Hambuda 2020). The largest protests were organised under #ShutItAllDown, beginning in Windhoek on Thursday, October 8, and spreading to other parts of the country, including Tsumeb, Swakopmund, Katima Mulilo, and Oranjemund. Protesters took on various concerns under the #ShutItAllDown umbrella. Because of the movement's careful and intentional use of social media, #ShutItAllDown's images and messages circulated on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and were taken up in online magazines and platforms in various parts of the world.

#ShutItAllDown occurred during societal upheavals that took place globally in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns. It emerged in an environment of ongoing contemporary local gender activism and Namibian solidarity with social media hashtag protests and movements happening transnationally and internationally, such as Black Lives Matter and South Africa's The Total Shutdown. Thus, social media activism featured as key for mobilising protesters, information dissemination, and garnering national and international visibility for the movement. Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook enabled activists to organise protests across the country, coordinate townhall meetings regarding sexual gender-based violence, and interrogate the government's responses to their demands. Also, social media gave Sister Namibia a platform to disseminate information about the protests both nationally and internationally. Along with effective social media practices, the organisers privileged strategic, transgressive disruption as fundamental to their activism.

The protests sprung up among a demographic of youth who in the context of the law are without much political influence or traditional cultural power. Thus, transgressive protest practices aided in bringing national and global attention to

their cause and giving them a measure of political influence. While the majority of protesters were women, the protests were nonbinary in nature, including men and queer peoples, with many holding placards reading “womxn.” The protesters cut across ethnic lines, and in their slogans, suggested an intersection between Namibia’s “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence and the nation’s colonial past (Melber 2020, para 19; also see Ndakalako-Bannikov 2020). This connection was made explicit in February 2022 when #ShutItAllDown was featured in *Amaka* digital magazine. The photography in this feature merges images of the victims of femicide with historically fraught localities. The photoshoot occurred in Goreangab an informal settlement in Katutura, and a Windhoek location in Namibia known for its history of Apartheid forced removals of Africans that led to violence in 1959. Situating the shoot in this location makes an intersectional connection between the area’s (and nation’s) colonial history, continued poverty, and gender-based violence. The photoshoot makes explicit #ShutItAllDown’s critique of the government’s addressing of gender-based violence, and envisions a Namibian feminism rooted in historical context and articulated from the positionality of these 2020 protests.

Situating #ShutItAllDown and Social Media Activism Historically Within 21st Century African Feminisms

In her definition of “African Feminist Thought” Amina Mama points out that African feminisms emerged in the context of “transnational liberal and emancipatory political discourses of the late 19th and 20th centuries of European empire” (2019, para 1). Following independence, women who had been part of anti-colonial liberation movements have had to pursue further struggles because the emergent African States often “hesitated or reverted to conservative patriarchal views when it came to extending freedom and equality to African women” (Mama 2019, para 1). In the context of Namibia, younger feminists participate in this struggle, and yet they also form a marked contrast to this generation, having been born after independence. Furthermore, the use of online spaces by Namibia’s young feminist activists resonates with Minna Salami’s delineation of 21st-century African feminisms as emerging in conjunction with Internet 2.0 and social media. Minna Salami describes the formal emergence of

African feminisms in the context of two “Rises”, the first, occurring between the 1970s and 1990, with Black African women directly referencing feminism and developing African feminist discourse (2023). This Rise landmarks moments such as the expansion of Women’s Studies in universities across Africa and globally, and the

UN decade for women 1975—1985, and the subsequent World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, which resulted in coalition-building, increased (if insufficient) funding for feminist activism and scholarship across the continent and diaspora (Salami 2023, para 41).

A significant feature of this moment in African feminisms is the complicated and challenging process of “becoming”, as women hesitated at the use of the “*feminist*” label within the movement itself, which led key advocates of women’s issues to denounce the notion entirely...or to coin alternative terms to feminism” (Salami 2023, para 45; italics belong to Salami). The second Rise, on the other hand, tended to embrace the term “feminist” as key to their political identity. This Rise emerged in the 21st century and was ushered in by the Internet and social media, which allowed activists to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and provided new tools such as blogs, apps, and online petitions to advocate for, and foster change (Salami 2023). Young feminists seized upon social media to challenge conservative and patriarchal practices of political participation across various geographical contexts (Dieng, Haastrup, and Kang 2023). It also enabled contemporary movements to highlight the foothold patriarchy has in earlier feminist and gender activist organisations (Dieng, Haastrup, and Kang 2023). Salami’s periodisation of African feminisms was evident in #ShutItAllDown as the youth used social media as a means of gaining political power. Their transgressive protest practices, a turn away from respectability politics, is also a feature of transnational and global contemporary feminist movements, as young feminist activists use new forms of activism to challenge the status quo, and distinguish themselves from earlier generations of feminist and women’s activism and their work with respective nation-states (see Hassim 2023; Dieng, Haastrup, and Kang 2023; McFadden 2018). #ShutItAllDown is thus part of a new generation of feminist activists that use social media as a significant new site of protest to focus national attention on gender-based violence and push for legal and constitutional changes to bring about gender equality (Okech 2023).

While #ShutItAllDown makes apparent the generational divide between contemporary and earlier feminist activism, it also reveals instances of collaborative intergenerational Namibian feminisms that continue to confront the aftermaths of Namibia's colonial past for women and LGBTQI+ Namibians in unexpected, disruptive, and yet productive ways.

Social Media and the Generational Divide Within Namibian Feminist Activist Practices

#ShutItAllDown's intentional deployment of social media for their activism, and the simultaneous move by Sister Namibia to exclusively online spaces is a shift in activist practices that signals a generational divide within Namibian feminist protest culture. #ShutItAllDown began in response to a call on Twitter for protesters to meet in a designated area in downtown Windhoek to demonstrate their frustration at the government's "inaction" regarding Namibia's high rates of sexual gender-based violence and femicide. In their planning of the protests, the organisers—Bertha Tobias, Ndiilokelwa Nthengwe, and Lebbeus Hashikutuva—targeted a demographic of online social media users already invested in protesting sexual and gender-based violence. Tobias explains that

their individual social media accounts played the primary role of mobilising people and sustaining the movement, which also eventually took on its own presence within the online community... [T]hrough Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram it was easy to map out the demographic that had quickly taken to the issue of SGBV and the demand for immediate reform. [She further explained] that the group also had to be clever with the kind of posters, music and language associated with their initiative (Madia et al. 2022, 119).

Social media gave the protesters a platform not easy to ignore, and visibility before government officials who may have otherwise dismissed their concerns. The organisers considered the power of social media as "an institution" capable of provoking action from the politicians, who were also their elders. As Nthengwe explains:

We realised we could use [social media] as another institution because most of our elected leaders don't have social media for the reason that they know we would hold them accountable publically [sic] and that is something they do not want to be confronted with [...] We saw social media as a watchdog,

one that can be used to close the hierarchy gap between those in parliament versus the people (Madia et al. 2022, 119).

Social media thus becomes a space of empowerment and agency in the face of a political body that disvalues youth and their voices. The first day of the protests culminated at the House of Parliament where the protesters delivered a list of 27 demands outlining actions the government could take to address sexual gender-based violence more adequately. The list of demands outlined radical reform within the legal, educational, and private sectors.

While the Office of the Prime Minister's response on October 10 and 13 lacked "detailed plans...deadlines [and] success metrics" (MICT Namibia 2020), the government pointed out that some of the demands on the list were already in the process of being addressed (Kuugongelwa-Amadhila 2020b). The movement's lack of knowledge regarding the government's (and other feminist organisations') past work to address Namibian gender concerns suggests a generational divide, since, as gender consultant and Sister Namibia representative Brigit Loots points out, the Namibian government has been making plans for substantial gender reform since 2001. Sister Namibia nevertheless stood in solidarity with the youth, recognising much of the inaction that nevertheless persists around the government's effort to address violence towards women. This was something Sister Namibia was able to do effectively because of their own then-recent shift from publishing in print to an exclusively online presence.

Sister Namibia and Social Media Activist Solidarity

Sister Namibia is a feminist organisation and magazine founded by Liz Frank and Elizabeth IlKhaxas in 1989, a year before Namibia's independence, to give women a voice in the new process of nation-building (Frank and IlKhaxas 2006). Since its inception, Sister Namibia has educated the local and international community regarding Namibian feminisms and gender activism using various means, including testimony, fiction, art, educational articles, and more. Using these means, Sister Namibia has featured the work and leaders of various feminist organisations across the country. The organisation draws its leadership from both older and younger feminist activists, and the site's educational technique bridges the divides between academic and intellectual feminist inquiry, everyday

experience resulting from gendered identities, and activism, highlighting their collaborative core and intersectional approach (Edwards-Jauch 2012). The magazine was distributed nationally and to international subscribers and libraries in collaboration with NGOs (Frank and IKhaxas 2006). However, in 2019, due to increasing budgetary constraints, Sister Namibia decided to move their magazine entirely online, publishing on a website and maintaining a strong and active social media presence. This move to exclusively online spaces was intended to target young people aged 18-35, who Sister Namibia believes are the future of feminist activism in Namibia. While the move accentuated the generational divide between young activists using social media and older feminist activists uncomfortable or unfamiliar with social media, the organisation hopes that the information they feature will be shared by their followers on other platforms like WhatsApp. This would ensure that their work reaches rural spaces as well as older feminists who may not use or frequent popular social media sites.

The move to online spaces positioned Sister Namibia magazine perfectly to strategically assist in #ShutItAllDown's online activism. While certainly intentionally planned, #ShutItAllDown very quickly took on a life of its own—something its leaders did not expect (Madia et al. 2022). It was likely for this reason that #ShutItAllDown created a steady social media presence under its name only after the protests ended, forming its Twitter and Instagram accounts in February 2021. In the meantime, the local and international public scrambled to find information regarding the protests, and Sister Namibia stepped into this gap, disseminating information on their newly formed social media spaces regarding the protesters' demands, and being able to couple this information with their decades-long understanding of the landscape of activism, policy work, and government (in)action regarding Namibia's epidemic of violence towards women. Sister Namibia became a key space where people turned to for information (Sister Namibia 2020b). On their Twitter feed and Instagram page, Sister Namibia deconstructed the problematic nature of the government's first and initial response to the protests on October 10 on an ideological level. In their response, the government asserted the role of women and female children within patriarchal roles and normative gender binaries (Kuugongelwa-Amadhila 2020a). On Twitter, Sister Namibia outlined how the government's response to the protest highlighted the lack of an intersectional approach to sexual gender-based violence

in its call for calm and its appeal to conservative stereotypes of female identities as “mothers” and “sisters” (Sister Namibia 2020d). Decentring gender and patriarchy, Sister wrote:

This language is dangerous. You are perpetuating the problem at the highest level. Human beings are dying and being traumatised. Even one’s [sic] that aren’t mothers or sisters or daughters. We don’t have to fit into stereotypical roles to deserve freedom, autonomy and security. These are basic HUMAN rights. (Sister_Namibia 2020c)

Sister furthermore critiqued the government’s characterisation of sexual gender-based violence and femicide as being a result of “evil” rather than a systemic problem. Sister replied:

You are mandated to serve a secular country, but we have long lost hope of you fulfilling your constitutional duty to do so. Instead you insist on manipulating the Christian sensitivities of your constituencies for political gain...Most alarmingly, this shows a profound ignorance of the situation—our problem is systemic not demonic—How can you hope to defeat [gender-based violence] if you cannot even demonstrate that you understand what it is? (Sister_Namibia 2020c)

Sister’s contention was borne out in that on October 13, after days of silence, the President finally responded with a statement regarding the protests, describing them as a sign of hope and faith in the government (Sister_Namibia 2020a). Sister introduced this quote to their Instagram audience with an image of a protester holding a cardboard sign that read: “And the president said and I quote” (Sister Namibia 2020a). This was followed by a photo of the clipped newspaper article. The President’s comment signals his failure to recognise the urgency felt by the protesters: the protesting youth regarded this violence as a war on female bodies, which is a marker of everyday life in Namibia. Accordingly, they framed the protests within the context of a liberation struggle which has failed women, girls, and queer Namibians.

The sentiment of a continued war in which women and girls are the victims was echoed in the placards during the protest. For instance, two placards held by women read: “It is our blood that waters your freedom” and “Writing this in ink because the blood of women wasn’t enough”. Both comments allude to the national anthem, which praises the bravery and martyrs of the liberation

movement, “whose blood waters our freedom”. While verbally leaving the readers to make their own sense of the President’s tone-deaf response, the preface that Sister gives to the article (a protester with a water bottle tucked between their thighs and a cardboard sign held with both hands at the level of the camera) implies objection to his statement. Their framing of the President’s remarks infers the need for continued protest and activism for reform, and comprehensive education regarding how gender-based violence operates in Namibia, in solidarity with the ongoing #ShutItAllDown protests.

Transgressive Protests and the Turn Away from Respectability Politics

The organisers of the protests made careful choices regarding what #ShutItAllDown means, and their mode of activism. The protests sprung up among a demographic of youth (Gen Zs) who normally do not have much political influence or traditional cultural power, thus driving the leaders’ decisions for transgressive protest tactics. Tobias describes their choices as “genuine and deliberate and transgressive” (Madia et al. 2022, 119). Hashikutuva described their disruptive means of protest as “confronting docile and properly maintained systems of power...asserting that abnormal situations require action that is, in itself, disruptive, drastic and abnormal” (Hambuda 2020). For instance, the protesters did not apply for a police escort or permit to protest, and when the police nevertheless tried to escort them, the protesters refused to follow a fixed route. Anne Hambuda writes that

The first day of the march was probably the most surprising for law enforcement agencies. Unable to anticipate the movements of the group to sufficiently prepare themselves, they were left scrambling and annoyed, especially when protesters stormed parliament (2020).

This accomplished the purpose of disrupting the city’s day-to-day, one of the aims of #ShutItAllDown. Hambuda describes the day as “an extremely disruptive and inconvenient time for anyone who was not invested in it. From hundreds of people sitting in the middle of an intersection and shutting it down...and other disruptive tactics, the #ShutItAllDown protesters wanted to make a statement” (2020). The protesters carried posters and chanted the phrase “My Koekie My

Keuse [My Pussy My Choices],” a phrase used in efforts to “de-stigmatize [sic] bodily autonomy for women amidst the fight for pro-choice laws” (Madia et al. 2022, 115). They also danced and twerked to WAP by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

Following the protests, older feminists reprimanded the youth for their disrespectful protest tactics, finding the twerking to WAP offensive. They also attempted to give the youth direction as to “how you protest correctly.” In a conversation, an older gender activist considered the protests unsuccessful because the youth did not talk to the authorities—who were significantly older—with respect and failed to recognise the importance of cultural traditions of respect to elders. However, this transgressive style of protesting was an intentional turning away from respectability politics in activism. This transgressive stance serves a purpose, as Liz McQuiston (2019) explains in her discussion of the effect of protest posters, which resonates with transgressive protest acts like twerking and disruptive marching:

[A]gitational images represent a power struggle; a rebellion against an established order and a call to arms, or a passionate cry of concern for a cause. They signify, in short, an attempt to bring about change, whether driven by the cry of an individual or the heat of the crowd. It is the emotion, aggression or immediacy of this imagery that constitutes a visual power that links into the passions of the viewer. (6)

This has resonance with South African student protests in 2015 and 2016—#FeesMustFall and #EndRapeCulture.

Discussing these intersectional student feminist movements in South Africa, Amanda Gouws (2017) argues that young protesters used intersectional thinking as a means for facilitating radical change. These movements’ radical impetus was undergirded by “militant irreverence” (Gouws 2017, 24). Thus while, like radical second-wave Western feminism, these South African movements were attentive to the objectification of women’s bodies, reproductive rights and the policing of sexuality, their resistance was also

...against matriarchal leadership and the construction of women as mothers through the nationalism of the ANC. [furthermore], [t]he inclusion of trans/

queer and LGBTQI students opened a space for a radically different subject to challenge the normative binary logic of women/man (male/female), and...it poses the radical challenge to male-dominated societies that if we destabilise this binary, who is dominant? (Gouws 2017, 24)

In similar-style protesting, the Namibian #ShutItAllDown activists carefully planned a protest that was undergirded by a philosophy of radical interventions. Tobias has explained that #ShutItAllDown

...means that everything needs to be brought to a standstill until we can re-evaluate what it is about Namibian systems of safety that is not working for Namibian women. Until we have answers to those questions, we do not believe it is right, healthy or in the best interest of anyone to continue doing business as usual. We don't want economic activity of any sort to continue as usual if young women do not feel safe (Civicus 2021, para 5).

#ShutItAllDown's strategically disruptive protest style is in line with earlier protests by youth, such as Namibia's 2019 Slut Shame Walk movement (inspired by the North American SlutWalk of 2015), which "From the outset...sought to pair feminist messaging with a politics of spectacle, a noticeable break with feminist antirape organising in Namibia focused on rape law reform and enforcement" (Currier et al. 2021, 273).

However, collaborative solidarity work between older and contemporary youth-led organisations is not unusual in contemporary protest contexts. Ashley Currier, Erin Winchester, and Emily Chien (2021) describe #MeTooNamibia as a coalition emerging in 2019 between various NGOs, including Sister Namibia, Slut Shame Organisation, and the Office of the First Lady—a mix of early and contemporary feminist organisations. This coalition was formed "to offer support to SGBV survivors, provide a platform for survivors to share their stories, and advocate for sex positivity" (271). As much Namibian feminist activism tends to occur apart from State involvement, the involvement of First Lady Monica Geingos makes #MeTooNamibia unusual—both in-country and in the context of international #MeToo movements. In fact, "#MeToo activists worried little about antifeminist backlash or threats of reputational, sexual, or physical harm" because of the First Lady's involvement, which "enveloped #MeToo organising, particularly the naming and shaming tactic, in respectability" (276). Similarly in the context of #ShutItAllDown, older feminists assisted in #ShutItAllDown's

negotiations with the government, lending the youth their seniority in the media-tions. Following the protests, #ShutItAllDown encountered difficulty being taken seriously in a conservative political landscape led by elderly men and women. The protesters were young and did not have all of the facts at hand regarding earlier steps taken by other feminist organisations and the government to address sexual gender-based violence and femicide. While their deliberate acts of disrespect got the protests national and international attention, it also brought them hostility from government officials and many in the public. However, Sister Namibia and Immaculate Mogotsi (Sister Namibia's then-chairwoman) were able to act as mediators between the movement's leaders and the government officials.

While the #ShutItAllDown's transgressive protest and deliberate turn against respectability politics, coupled with social media hashtag activism, divide earlier generations of feminist activist work from contemporary younger feminists, this is not a strict divide in the wider African feminist context. An example is Stella Nyanzi's radically rude Facebook poetry and controversial naked protests. In 2018, Stella Nyanzi published vulgar poetry on Facebook targeted at Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni (Allison 2019). This "masterpiece of calculated obscenity" levelled at the failures of the president's term in office led to her arrest under Uganda's cybercrime laws, and in one of her court appearances, Nyanzi disrobed, jiggled her breasts, and flung obscenities at the justice system (Allison 2019, para 8; Makoni 2021). Busi Makoni describes both this poetry and defiant disrobing as radical rudeness, an antisocial "resistance strategy" that uses words or the body, or both, to unsettle "civility and/or politeness, thereby subverting dominant modes of sociability through disruption and confrontation" (2021, 551, 552). Makoni contextualises Nyanzi's poetry in Ugandan colonial history when, in the 1940s, Bugandan activists used radical rudeness—"derogatory insults, disorderliness, intemperance and obnoxiousness to unsettle colonialists' pretensions to politeness and hospitality while denying Bugandans their freedom" (553). Nyanzi's naked protests also have historical precedent, predating colonialism and deployed as effective, subversive last-resort tactics to signal women's discontent and secure political or economic redress (Tamale 2017; Makoni 2021). While not drawing from cultural precedent in their protests as Nyanzi did, a similarity lies in that the #ShutItAllDown youth used disruptive protest with similar intent.

Discussing the symbolic meaning behind the transgressive public displays of the female naked body in response to repressive authoritarian regimes, Florence Ebila and Aili Mari Trip examine the “body symbolism” within the naked protests by the women of Apaa Uganda on April 17, 2015 (2017, 30). They draw from the meaning of female nakedness as a form of protest in Acholi culture in which as a last resort, women wield the symbolism behind motherhood as the bringer of life to communicate frustration and the need for redress. In this context, “the widowed protestors symbolically represented the source of life and their protest was a curse that threatened social death to the authorities” (38). Thus, these protests were as much social as they were political, “drawing on culturally resonant understandings of motherhood” (26). While not drawing from cultural practice as the Ugandan women did, #ShutItAllDown’s twerking to WAP nevertheless carried symbolic resonance in the Namibian context. As the #ShutItAllDown youth twerked, they signalled their refusal to being inscribed as chaste, obedient, respectable young women, voiceless in the context of conservative nationalist and religious ideologies, and various of Namibia’s cultural traditions. However, drawing WAP into their protest practice resonates globally with conversations regarding the appropriateness of the video when released earlier in 2020 (Serpell 2021). A significant reason for the controversy surrounding WAP was Cardi B and Meghan Thee Stallions portrayal of women desiring “sex for its own sake”, highlighting female pleasure and sexual agency, and turning the common notion of “prostitute” on its head (Serpell 2021, para 37). In her reading of WAP, Namwali Serpell points out that:

[T]he whore—or colloquially, hoe—*does* want. Yes, a whore exchanges sex for money or fine luxury items. But what makes the whore a hoe, what makes them distinct from a prostitute, is that they want sex for its own sake, too, being not just ready and willing but actively ravenous for it” (2021, *italics in original text*).

In bringing sexuality and sexual desire out of the private and into the public sphere, and using WAP and twerking as a symbol of sexual agency, they politicised eroticism as a challenge to the status quo and impetus for change (Tamale 2017; Lorde 1984). They also played on cultural and globally understood body symbolism to communicate their discontent.

#ShutItAllDown's Transnational and Global Activist Resonances

#ShutItAllDown's call to radical disruption of business (and government) -as usual shares affinities with transregional southern African feminist politics. It is also in conversation with global activism against police brutality toward Black people and people of colour, and violence toward women. 2020 was a year of international and local protests, including #BLM and #EndSARS, with COVID-19 restrictions exacerbating police brutality and sexual gender-based violence. #ShutItDown protesters stood in solidarity with both of these movements (Ngutjinazo and Oliveira 2020), and in turn, garnered transnational attention in South Africa (Shapwanale 2020). Indeed, the hashtag ShutItAllDown evokes a transnational connection to #TheTotalShutDown, a feminist protest that occurred across southern Africa in 2018, in which Namibians participated. At #ShutItAllDown a protester in Windhoek made an explicit link between Namibian and South African women's activism—both in past and contemporary contexts—when they held up a sign that read: “When you strike a woman you strike a rock”. #TheTotalShutdown Intersectional Women's Movement Against Gender-Based Violence occurred on August 1 2018 and was a women's and gender non-conforming-only march to protest gender-based violence and femicide (Gouws 2018). This transnational and transregional movement was coordinated from South Africa. Women marched in various regions across the country, as well as in Namibia, Lesotho, and Botswana; there were 19 marches in total on that day (Head 2018). The movement aimed to get the South African government's attention which had, up to this point, been mostly silent regarding the violent treatment of women through social and economic disruption (Moosa 2018b), hence “the platform of a total shutdown with women and gender nonconforming people being asked to stay away from work” (Moosa 2018c, para 1). To that end, the march in Pretoria culminated at the steps of the Union Buildings in Tshwane, memorialising the women's march of 1956 against the Apartheid regime. There, women held up signs that repeated the slogan used in 1956— “When You Strike a Woman You Strike a Rock”. In anticipation of the president's speech on Women's Day, the organisation handed President Ramaphosa a memorandum listing 24 demands, the first of which required acknowledgement “...from the office of the President that gender-based violence

against womxn...is pervasive and widespread and that it cannot be tolerated at any level of society” (Moosa 2018a, para 4). Similarly in Windhoek, Namibians marched under the theme “My Body is not a Crime Scene”; they gathered outside of the Katutura Police Station to make recommendations on how to better assist women in situations of gender-based violence, and read out the names of many women who had lost their lives to such violence (Alweendo et. al. 2018; Mukaiwa 2018). This protest makes transnational and transhistorical connections with slogans, chants and hashtags that are reminders that women were significant actors in the liberation struggle, and the high rates of gender-based violence signal southern Africa’s incomplete liberation work.

Conclusion

#ShutItAllDown was effective because of social media’s ability to amplify and unify youth expressions of frustration with the State’s historically slow response to gender-based violence, all coalescing around the death of Shannon Wasserfal. The protests sprung up among youth (particularly women) mostly under 25 years old, a demographic with little political influence and traditional cultural power. Thus, the organisers used strategic, transgressive disruption and a turn away from respectability politics, along with social media as fundamental to their activism. The use of social media in conjunction with disruptive protest resonates with contemporary transnational and global hashtag protest practices; it drew international attention to the movement, and contributed in making #ShutItAllDown the effective movement it became. In highlighting the role of Sister Namibia in these protests, this article points to an actor not apparent during the protests on the ground, but that nevertheless draws a generational throughline with implications for #ShutItAllDown. Sister Namibia’s collaborative efforts are emblematic of a culture of feminist solidarity practices between Namibia’s early feminist organisations and the contemporary groups, bridging the generational divide evident in the protesters use of social media and their turn away from respectability politics—something some older gender activists disapproved of. While the generational divide persists, and youth benefit the most from the strategic use of social media, moments of solidarity across generational and political divisions—such as Sister Namibia’s actions, and the collaborative

practices evident in #MeTooNamibia—demand that we are attentive to acts of solidarity in order to understand the movements themselves. These acts across divisions shape the landscape of Namibian feminist and gender activism more broadly.

Notes

1. Loots, Brigit. Personal interview. Windhoek, August 5 2022; Titus, Hildegard. Personal interview, Tape Recording. Windhoek, August 12 2022.
2. For instance, the University of Namibia (UNAM) students campaigned at the UNAM administration building for clearer rules about reporting sexual harassment on campus.
3. The nonbinary nature of this protest was made explicit in 2022 during an interview and photoshoot with #ShutItAllDown protesters and Amaka Magazine. The signs the Namibian protesters held up in the photographs point to a contemporary Namibian feminist protest culture that is queer-led and interethnic. One prominent sign held up during the photoshoot lists the hashtags *samesexmarriage*, *abolishsodomylaw*, *queerandhere*, and in Oshiwambo (thus forging another cross-ethnic link) *omashengeovanu* [*#homosexualsarepeople*] (Madia, et. al. 2022).
4. Amaka is a women-run pan-African media-tech platform and magazine dedicated to facilitating social change for African women globally.
5. For instance, in one photo, six activists—women and nonbinary persons—stand holding framed photo portraits—waist high and turned to the camera. The photographs are of six young female victims of sexual and gender-based violence: Shannon Wasserfal; Ndamononghenda Nafuka; Avihe Cheryl Ujaha; Rejoice Shovaleka; Martha Nafuka, and Magdalena Stoffels. Each of the femicide victims and the accompanying activists is an individual, and yet together they emphasise activist Ndilokelwa Nthengwe's point that "Shannon is not the face of...sexual gender-based violence, because those faces are everywhere" (Madia et al. 2022, 117).
6. Loots, Brigit. 2022. Personal interview. August 5 2022.
7. Many placards used "womxn" instead of "woman" to indicate that the protest was nonbinary and inclusive of Namibia's queer community.
8. Titus, Hildegard. Personal interview, Tape Recording. Windhoek, 12 August 2022.

9. Anonymous Source. Personal conversation. Windhoek, 23 July 2022.
10. It is worth noting that #MeTooNamibia emerged out of digital feminist collaborative solidarity in that after the Slut Shame Walks, women reached out to and tagged the Slut Shame Walk online platforms, relying on the movement's strong and visible social media presence "to name and shame their rapists," thus shedding light on serial rapists and rape culture in Namibia (Currier et al. 2021, 274). Currier et al. describe this collaborative and disruptive "sex-positive feminist organizing" between various organisations (that shaped how #MeTooNamibia emerged) as founded in "productive disruptions," activist work that unsettles "anti-SGBV feminist activist spaces, strategies, and tactics in ways that cultivate new feminist activist constituencies and cooperation with different social actors" (271).
11. Nyanzi's poetry was preceded by her nude protest, staged in 2016 at Makerere University following a serious work dispute and mistreatment by her boss (Makoni 2021; Tamale 2017). Naked protests must be mentioned here, even though they differ from the defiance of the #ShutItAllDown, because part of the threat of Nyanzi's protests is her status as a mother. Nyanzi capitalises on cultural beliefs regarding mothers of twins (as she is) to further deepen the threat of her naked body in her protests (Tamale 2017). Her naked body also "threatens" on a nationalist level as it signals the nation-as-mother's unravelling (Tamale 2017, 70). Naked protests are the kind of politics that undermine "the foundations of the hegemony of repressive regimes" (Tamale 2017, 58). It should also be mentioned that Nyanzi's naked protests caused controversy because naked protests are considered acts of the last resort and weapons of the weak (Ebila and Tripp 2017). Some asked whether an educated woman like Nyanzi may have had other avenues to pursue redress (Ebila and Tripp 2017).
12. Men, and those unable to join the march but wanting to act in solidarity were asked to leave work for half an hour between 1.00pm and 1.30pm, and not spend money that day to assist in economic disruption (Moosa 2018c). Men were also asked to stand in solidarity by filling in for women and gender-nonconforming people at work, to assist wives, mothers, and partners in their home duties, and support the movement by "stopping the abusing and intimidating of women, gender-nonconforming and children" (Moosa 2018c, para 10).

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Feminist Organising and Activism in Ghana: Commonalities, Differences, and Challenges

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Abstract

Research on digital feminism and feminist activism in Ghana has increased in recent years. Studies that focus on digital spaces such as Facebook and X, previously known as Twitter, have explored and profiled the nature of the activism, the issues it examines, its impact, and public reactions to the movements. A noteworthy aspect of findings from these studies is that these digital spaces have offered feminists distinct audiences and outlets to address issues which may not have been the focus of older movements. While the older feminist movements have focused on policy-oriented issues such as women's political participation, economic rights, education, and gender-based violence, digital activists have concerned themselves with resistance and protests around bodily autonomy, sexual desires, and orientation. Extending these studies, we explore the connections or commonalities between digital and pioneer forms of feminist organising in Ghana. Engaging digital archives of activism led by older feminists and interviews from young feminists in two digital movements in Ghana, #PepperDemMinistries and #HijabIsanIdentity, we compare the tools and approaches used by feminist activists in the country, analyse the points of convergence and divergence and examine how the two generations respond to the intergenerational shifts in feminist activism in Ghana. We conclude that while feminist organising in Ghana is evolving into digital spaces, digital feminist activism in Ghana is a continuation of the older forms of organising employed by pioneer feminists.

Keywords: Ghanaian feminism, Gender equality, Inter/Intragenerational Activism, New Media, Virtual space feminism, Feminist parallels and divergence, Women's Advocacy epochs

Introduction

In the last decade, feminist organising and activism in Ghana have experienced a significant shift from using predominantly physical spaces to including digital spaces (Darkwah 2021). The addition of the digital space has not only expanded the sites for feminist activism but also reignited and enhanced it, as well as enabled alterations in the ways activists communicate with their audience (Mohammed 2020; Dieng et al. 2022; Salami 2022). These digital spaces have also allowed for feminist organising for action locally, building connections, solidarity, education, and collective mobilising to go beyond the immediate community of activists and reach regional, national and international audiences at an easier and faster rate than was previously possible (Danso and Miller 2018; Mohammed 2020; Darkwah 2021).

Movements such as the #PepperDemMinistries have garnered a large audience and coverage since they entered the feminist and digital activism space in 2017. They have gained a wider audience from legacy media outlets, conventionally used by older feminist movements, such as print and electronic newspapers, national and international television stations, as well as new media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram (IG), which have all covered their advocacy and activism activities (General Entertainment 2018). In addition, local and international academic and non-academic researchers have researched these movements and their exploits (Donkor 2020). This coverage and online activism have re-centred and regenerated conversations about feminism in Ghana, giving space to more voices to contribute and critique gender inequities in Ghanaian society. They have also become spaces for peer education where people express and clarify differences through comments and reactions.

Despite these affordances, the Ghanaian feminist space has been inundated in the last five years with discussions and concerns for intergenerational feminist support and mentorship, arguments on whose activism or modalities are appropriate, and the acceptability of digital spaces for activism. While intergenerational feminist mentorship has been a practice in the country, the need for broad-scale discussions became paramount with the surge in digital feminism and questions or debates about tactics, relevance, and recognition of the works of pioneers, among others. Noteworthy, however, is that these dialogues

are not limited to Ghana. A 2017 FES Mozambique report on “Feminism in Africa: Trends and Prospects” reveals similar concerns about intergenerational struggles, the legitimacy of feminist theories in certain groups, and the connection between academia and activism being raised on the African continent (FES Briefing Papers 2017).

Deploying diverse outlets such as International Women’s Day (IWD) celebrations, national feminist forums, workshops and in-group meetings, various women and feminist-friendly institutions and groups in Ghana have set aside spaces to discuss the intergenerational concerns being raised, offer support and find ways to bridge this seeming gap. The African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF), for example, partnered with the #PepperDemMinistries to mark the 2018 IWD on the theme “Time is Now: Intergenerational Conversations on the Evolution of the Feminist Movement in Ghana” (The African Women’s Development Fund 2018; Danso and Miller 2018; Darkwah 2021). The event, dedicated to enriching intergenerational discussions and finding solutions to the prevailing discourses of an intergenerational gap in feminist activism in the country, addressed mindsets and conversations around the lack of interaction between the various feminist generations, the danger this poses for the collective gain of feminism in Ghana and what needs to be done to bridge the gap (The African Women’s Development Fund 2018).

To facilitate discussions at the event, speakers were grouped into three generations for a panel discussion. The panel constituted pioneer feminists in Ghana (referred to as “pacesetters”), the current wave of digital feminists (referred to as the “catalysts”), and a third group, referred to as the “bridge”, who represented a connection between the pacesetters and the catalysts. Following the panel discussion and other intergenerational events and conversations, a gap was identified in the knowledge of catalyst feminists regarding the publications and activism of pacesetter feminists. It also emerged that there was a perceived lack of mentorship from pacesetter feminists, and there were calls for acknowledgement of the works of the pacesetters as foundational to current and future feminist activism in Ghana. In her address, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, the keynote speaker at the event, expressed the need for a continuum of feminist activism in Ghana. She highlighted the works done by pioneer feminists and the efforts of the catalyst feminists and urged the audience to focus on building on

existing platforms and knowledge and not tear down the progress made. She also emphasised in her speech:

...many times, you hear conversations in political spaces, religious spaces, and feminist spaces as if what is being analysed and propounded is a first. I hope you will find that from the account that I provide today and interactions from the panel discussions, our efforts today have precursors... that there have been many foremothers who have made possible the many spaces women can so freely inhabit today, including family spaces where young women can feel free to express themselves in revolutionary ways...¹

As young feminists from Ghana, we acknowledge some of these knowledge gaps that have been identified during discussions on intergenerational feminism in Ghana. Further, we recognise that as feminists in academia, we are privileged to have access to some literature on and knowledge of the works of the pioneers. We have been mentored by some of the pioneer feminists and have taken courses on women's and gender studies as part of our graduate studies. However, this privilege may not extend to other young feminists in Ghana who may have gained their knowledge from new media spaces or feminist literature from other jurisdictions. With the dominance of the Internet, the emergence of social media as the fastest and easiest source of information, particularly for young people, for some of whom it is also the first source of knowledge about feminism (Mendes et al. 2018; Gu et al. 2023), young feminists in Ghana, for example, may lack access to relevant events such as the 1999 women's march against female murders in Ghana. This is because some of the young feminists in the country may not have been born, or may have been too young to witness this landmark event. A simple web search for this event in 2023 only shows one source of material on the march, which may not provide comprehensive information (Nsefo 2000). By contrast, there is a plethora of information on women's marches from other geographical contexts that occurred in the age of digital activism or in countries where the digitisation of news and events goes far back to events preceding the current wave of digitisation.

Given the lack of direct experience (lived or learned) or depth of knowledge of the histories of pioneer feminist activists, these online sources that focus on activism post the 1999 march are important for understanding feminism and mentorship spaces as well as catalysts for feminist causes. Young feminists'

definitions of feminism are thus influenced by transnational events and hashtag feminisms (Mendes et al. 2018), such as the global #MeToo movement in 2012, South Africa's #MenAreTrash in 2016, #beingfemaleinNigeria in 2015 and the #PepperDemMinistries in 2017. In this respect, they can be said to engage in what Salo and Mama refer to as “deductive generalisation and observation from the outside, from a physical and analytical distance, rather than from the perspective of someone engaged in feminist activism” (2001, 60) founded on deep Ghanaian feminist history.

These accounts are not intended to suggest that young feminists do not recognise the support of some pioneer feminists in Ghana. During the AWDF and #PepperDemMinistries IWD 2018 event, for example, Louise Carol Donkor, a member of the Pepper Dem Ministries, acknowledged the immense support from the pioneer feminists. In her words:

I mean, when Pepper Dem Ministries started, one thing that we have not taken for granted, one thing that we feel very grateful for, is the quality of support that, you know, we have enjoyed till today, and here in this room, we have unique people very amazing people who are high-profile people that you know lend their support to us, lend the legitimacy to our cause and we really do not take that for granted²

However, the fact that this debate and questions on the sufficiency or otherwise of intergenerational feminist support and mentorship, whose activism or modalities are appropriate, and the acceptability of digital spaces for activism still exist requires that conversations be initiated to tease out and piece together the connections between these two movements. Doing so would require going beyond conversations in meetings, to documenting such connections and histories as part of efforts to bridge the intergenerational gap and make relevant resources accessible to the current and future generations of feminists. We argue that documenting the histories, tools, platforms and approaches used by pioneer and digital feminist movements, as well as exploring their intersections, synergies and differences, could offer a resource for addressing current debates on feminist activism in Ghana; historicising these movements, their commonalities and differences; and building on this knowledge for future activism.

This article highlights how the current generation of feminist activists share similarities with those of previous epochs in their focus, tactics, and approach.

It also explains how these activists provide valuable resources and contribute to the activism spaces and explores the impact of this intergenerational activism on the country.

Methodology

To carry out this analysis, we employ interviews with seven young digital feminist activists from two prominent digital feminist activism spaces in Ghana, #PepperDemMinistries and #HijabIsanIdentity. The interviews were conducted in 2022 and supported by digital archives of discussions from forums on intergenerational feminism in Ghana, Facebook posts, tweets on X (Twitter) handles of these movements and some of their individual members, and reactions to these posts. The archival data on intergenerational discussions was collected from three conversations that featured panellists who are members of the movements under study. These are the National Feminist Forum 2021 and 2022 of the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) and the AWDF and #PepperDemMinistries IWD celebration in 2018. We also used a documentary on older feminist activism, "When Women Speak" (2022), co-produced by Akosua Adomako Ampofo and Kate Skinner and directed by Aseye Tamakloe, as data sources for this study. This documentary, in addition to existing peer-reviewed literature on feminist activism in Ghana, helped us tease out the experiences and perspectives of the pioneer feminists. We used all these data sources in a way that enables them to complement and validate each other.

While digital feminist activists in Ghana operate different platforms for their activism - Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube, among others (Donkor 2020; Mohammed 2020; Darkwah 2021) - we limit our focus in this study to posts and reactions from X (Twitter) and Facebook pages, the spaces most utilised by these activists. Further, while digital feminism and activism in Ghana predate the events of 2017 (Darkwah 2021; Plange 2021), our study focuses on movements or activism that gained momentum from 2017, namely #PepperDemMinistries and #HijabIsanIdentity. These movements catalysed the shift to digital space activism by feminists. The popularity of their approaches has contributed to widening the scope of reach and conversations on feminism in the country and beyond. They were also chosen for being feminist-led and

their activism being feminist-oriented; “they fight against rules and practices that restrict and undermine women and profess and advocate ideologies that aim to achieve social, economic, and political equality for women and that recognise the larger socioeconomic forces at play beyond individual female and male relations” (Adomako Ampofo 2018³).

The #PepperDemMinistries movement, which gained momentum in 2017, is the first to have spurred digital feminist activism. The convenors of the movement engaged social media platforms, notably Facebook, to advocate against patriarchy, disrupt dangerous narratives around gender constructions and expectations, and hold men accountable for their patriarchal societal actions. The #HijabiIsanIdentity movement has been in existence since 2019. The convenors protest discrimination against hijab-wearing women in schools and workspaces in Ghana and employ Facebook and X (Twitter) in organising and raising awareness. While these movements seem discreet, their young feminist activists share a lot in common, from being friends on social media to co-convenors of their movement events (see Table 1).

Table 1: Convenors of digital feminist movements

Movement	Feminist Conveners/Activists
#PepperDemMinistries	Louise Carol Donkor, Ama Opoku Agyemang, Efe Plange, Jayjay Akuamoah, Amazing Grace Danso, Noelyne Mensah, Henrietta Mercer, Felicity Nelson and Efua Sintim
#HijabIsanIdentity	Bashiratu Kamal-Muslim, Bilkis Nuhu and Hajia Xalia

Feminist activism in Ghana: An inter/intragenerational analysis.

Feminist and gender equality organising and activism efforts in Ghana have primarily been documented by the activists in the movements themselves or by other persons outside of the movements (Tsikata 1989; Manuh 1991; Manuh 1993; Mama 2003; Prah 2003; Mama et al. 2005; Tsikata 2009; Sheldon 2016;

Britwum 2020; Darkwah 2021). While documented evidence indicates that such activities predate colonialism, documenting specific events has been a meandering process (Prah 2003). Prah, for instance, notes:

In organising my thoughts in preparation for writing this paper, I realised that I had also been chasing illusions. I had naively assumed, somehow, that the analysis of the trajectory of women's participation in Ghana's political, intellectual, and cultural life would follow a fairly uniform, straight path characterised by steps or phases. However, history is not linear, and the course of the feminist agenda may better be viewed as a meandering path than one that moves in a regular pattern of progression (2003,1).

Prah, however, goes ahead to categorise her analysis into two time frames: the Pre-Independence Feminism and Gender Politics period, which looked at the state of women before colonialism, the Convention People's Party (CPP) era and the period of military rule; and the period of "Grand 'Feminist' Illusion" which discusses the start of actual feminist activism in Ghana (Prah, 2003, 34). Britwum and Odoi (no date) also identify four epochs of feminist organising and activism and how they have evolved over the years: the pre-independence era, which covers organising and activism preceding the 1950s; the post-early independence period, which looks at events from 1967 to the 1980s; the mid independence period, which highlights occurrences in the 1990s to the period preceding digital activism; and the digital wave of women's organising beginning in 2012.

We situate our intergenerational analysis in two epochs by Britwum and Odoi (no date), namely the post-early independence period beginning in the 1980s, which Prah (2003) also identifies as the period of actual feminist activism in Ghana, through to the digital wave of feminist activism from 2012 to date. Worth noting is that women's organising or presence in the movement has not necessarily meant that they are feminist-oriented (Prah 2003; Mama, 2005; Mama 2011). Women's activism mainly dominated the pre-colonial period. However, we are interested in feminist-specific activism led or aligned in Ghana, hence our focus on the chosen periods. We further reframed the classifications of the women's movement into two periods for this paper to reflect the generational analysis of interest to the authors: pioneer feminist activism from 1980 to 2016, and digital feminist activism from 2017 to date. The year 2017 was selected as

the marker for digital space activism because it signified the pronounced shift of feminist activism to digital spaces by the digital feminists engaged in this study.

Feminist Organising and Activism in Ghana: Commonalities and Differences in Tools and Approaches among Pioneer and Digital Feminists

This section explores the various organising and activist tools/approaches employed by pioneer and digital feminists in Ghana. We compare the tools and strategies used by these feminists, explore the commonalities and differences, and analyse the intersections therein and their responses to intergenerational activism.

Feminists in Ghana, irrespective of the generation under consideration, have rallied around diverse subjects of interest to challenge exploitative systems that inhibit the development of women and propose ways to better the lives of women in the country. Their rallying has also been guided by the desire to transform gender relations and correct existing inequalities in structures in both public and private spheres to achieve equity in society and advance the diverse interests of women (Prah 2003; Tsikata 2009; Darkwah 2021). To achieve these goals, Ghanaian feminists have employed diverse spaces in their organising and activism, informed by the times and the availability of resources. The social, historical, political, and technological environment offered space, favoured and spurred certain kinds of activism and generated issues of interest. Factors such as the background, age, educational background, or career type of these feminists have shaped the approaches employed. These factors notwithstanding, an intergenerational analysis of secondary data, digital archival data, and interviews shows that the methods used by these digital feminists do not differ from those of pioneer feminists. As with pioneer feminists, digital activists also employ grassroots approaches to reaching out and addressing women's issues.

Pioneer Feminist Organising and Activism in Ghana, 1980 to 2017

Pioneer feminists have engaged tools such as mass media, broadcast and print media, communication and other modes of activism such as face-to-face interactions, picketing, marches, vigils, demonstrations, forums, coalitions (Women's Manifesto, Domestic Violence Coalition, Sisters Keepers and NETRIGHT), mentorship, academic and non-academic publications, training workshops on women's empowerment, the teaching of gender-related courses in institutions of higher education, and pushing for the introduction of women-friendly laws (Prah 1996; Prah 2003; Mama 2005; Tsikata 2009; Amoah-Boampong 2018). They led or aligned with other women's groups to push for issues such as women's political participation, economic empowerment and justice, education, laws, and policies on women, and/or advocate for the effective implementation of such laws (Prah 2003; Tsikata 2009; Britwum 2020). Pioneer feminist academics have used their activist spaces in and out of the universities to push for and help found gender centres and pioneer the introduction of women's and gender studies courses in universities in Ghana (Prah 1996; Tamakloe 2022).

At the University of Ghana, pacesetter feminists such as Profs. Takyiwah Manuh, Dzodzi Tsikata and Akosua Adomako Ampofo were instrumental in establishing the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA) in 2004 (Tamakloe 2022). Similarly, Profs. Mansah Prah and Akua Opokua Britwum were key in establishing the Centre for Gender Research, Advocacy and Documentation (CEGRAD) at the University of Cape Coast in 2013. Through their research, they have produced a body of work that has enriched the knowledge of both feminists and non-feminists about the critical roles women have played in Ghana, their political struggles, organising and activism efforts, and women's economic life (Manuh 1991; Darkwah 2001; Prah 2003; Britwum 2020; Tamakloe 2022). They also partnered with other networks and movements to develop programmes on gender and gender research to help shape the discourse (Prah 1996; Tamakloe 2022) and bridge the gap between academics and activists. The Women's Manifesto Coalition (WMC) initiated by ABANTU for Development drew attention to the insufficient attention given to critical issues affecting women generally and concerns about the under-representation of women in politics, policy and decision-making (Tsikata 2009). The Domestic

Violence Coalition, akin to the WMC, was made up of groups and individuals who pushed for the Domestic Violence Act (Act 732) to safeguard women from diverse abuses (Tsikata 2009; Amoah-Boampong 2018).

The shift between feminist activism then and now is that the older generation, through their interconnectedness, addressed issues on different levels and targeted shifts in policy-making. However, that is not necessarily the case for the younger generation. As indicated earlier, based on the two movements examined, feminist agendas are pursued socially using social tools, but we at no point encountered legal pursuit of concerns raised. This is not to say that issues pursued are mutually exclusive of policy attention, especially with discussion on the HijabIsanIdentity movement. However, there is a clear distinction in the modalities of engagement between the two generations, especially when discussions transcend advocacy dissemination.

Pioneer feminist lawyers such as Akua Kuenyehia, Dorcas Coker-Appiah, Nana Oye Lithur, and Sheila Minkah-Premo used their knowledge and platform as lawyers to found and work on legal issues of interest to women in Ghana. They created forums and spaces to support and educate women on their legal rights and push for laws on women. Going by the ideology that “Laws do not get implemented on their own unless people know about them” (Coker-Appiah, as featured in Tamakloe 2022), these feminists, through research and legal education with women in different public spaces, took on issues that affected women’s effective economic participation, pushed for changes in unhealthy workplace rules and practices, and the abolishing of harmful practices such as *trokosi* (Tamakloe 2022). They also set up offices to receive women’s complaints and offer them support. Reports produced from the nationwide research on violence against women conducted by the Gender Centre and Human Rights Documentation Centre became the advocacy tool for the passage of the Domestic Violence Law of Ghana (Dorcas Coker-Appiah, as featured in Tamakloe 2022).

These pioneer feminist lawyers also made conscious efforts to mentor young lawyers. Nana Oye Lithur and Sheila Minkah-Premo, during their panel discussions at the AWDF and Pepper Dem Ministries 2018 IWD intergenerational event, recounted how pioneer lawyers such as Akua Kuenyehia and Dorcas Coker-Appiah had mentored and supported them on their journey as lawyers and feminists.

Digital Feminist Organising and Activism in Ghana, 2017 to Date

The shift to the recent digital platform activism is characterised by a young demographic of feminists (Darkwah 2021), mostly in their mid to late thirties or younger. These feminists have predominantly engaged new media platforms, such as X(Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, in promoting their issues and agenda. In these spaces, self-identified individual feminists, as well as groups, have engaged in sensitisation on gender equality, challenging patriarchal structures and other forms of social justice concerns. On their group and individual social media handles (X and Facebook), the #PepperDemMinistries, for example, have flipped gender narratives to encourage critical, radical, robust, honest analysis and appreciation of gender stereotypes in Ghanaian society and generate conversations on gender inequality.

#PepperDemMinistries (PDM) is a group of like-minded women on Facebook who were already probing into the structures operating in Ghanaian society that somehow leave both genders imbalanced and incompatible to work in unison to advance society. We are called “Pepper Dem Ministries” because we engage with the issues which are primarily uncomfortable and unpopular in our socio-cultural space. Pepper can burn, and we raise issues that make people shift in their seats. Our advocacy focuses mainly on gender (@Pepper Dem Ministries Facebook page 22 September 2017).

A distinguishing feature between these activists, however, is their religious affiliation and regions of origin. The Pepper Dem Ministries movement comprised mostly Southern Ghanaian, middle-class, educated young, mostly Christian, and non-practising religious feminists. Despite these characteristics, their discussions were mainly socially based. HijabIsanIdentity, while having similar identities with the Pepper Dem Ministries feminists, had a significantly marked identity which formed the core of the movement. Religion was a fulcrum and pivotal in setting the movement’s agenda. They specifically used their platform to raise awareness and engage institutions on the ills of discriminating against hijab-wearing women. Their movement centred on the discrimination that targeted hijab-wearing women and girls in institutional sales in Ghana. In 2019, they used their social media handles to mobilise for a march against hijab-wearing discrimination.

This notwithstanding, the issues they have addressed and the approaches employed beyond the digital spaces have been similar to those of pioneer feminists. Feminists in both epochs dealt with social issues interconnecting gender, religion and other gendered traditional norms that had been institutionalised formally and socially. They have addressed diverse issues of violence against women, such as rape culture and physical abuse, and raised funds to support institutions and individual women. Pepper Dem Ministries raised funds to support the reopening of the Ark Foundation in 2018. Some of their convenors have published academic works about the movement (see Plange 2021). Bashiratu-Kamal Muslim, one of the convenors of the #HijabIsanIdentity movement, also has published work regarding their experiences as convenors (see Clark and Mohammed 2023).

The activities and issues pursued are also event-based. For example, the #PepperDemMinistries began in response to specific events and online reactions to them. Efe Plange, giving a brief background to the events leading to the start of the Pepper Dem Ministries Movement, explained that the modality of flipping scripts entrenched in Ghana's social system was inspired by an online altercation between two male Ghanaian journalists. She noted that by flipping the scripts, the Pepper Dem Ministries activists started promoting the message, "Men are their enemies". Narrating the success of this approach, Efe Plange remarked,

The hashtag trended because it was different; you always hear 'women are their enemies'. So, I think because of how ridiculous that statement is, 'men are their own enemies,' it became popular, it trended for some time, and many people started joining, so that is how we discovered more girls and women like us⁴.

Another important event that advanced the activism modality explored by the Pepper Dem Ministries movement was an incidence of marital "misconduct" involving a social media socialite, Efua Schwarzenegger, and how social media users pursued it. The movement sought to change the narrative around marital behaviour, highlighting the double standards and gender biases that often place blame on women when their partners engage in infidelity. Efe details this in our interview, indicating that,

Shortly after that was Efua Schwarzenegger's issue, where her ex-husband caught her in bed with another man and leaked nude photos of them in bed immediately. We knew what the narrative was going to be. Men cheat on women all the time, and what society does when it happens is blame it on women and make it seem like they are not doing some things right. We decided to use the opportunity to touch on even more harmful narratives that we wanted to see changed in Ghanaian society. Made it official and created a Facebook page; the following day, it grew to twenty thousand followers. I think that is where we realised that we could really do something with it⁵.

The two scenarios the authors found offered the Pepper Dem Ministries activists the opportunity to flip gender narratives to incite critical, radical, robust, and honest analysis and appreciation of gender stereotypes in our society. Similarly, the pioneer activists capitalised on pending issues and picketed to draw attention to injustices faced by women in Ghana (Nana Oye Lithur as featured in Pepper Dem Ministries and AWDF 2018; Tamakloe 2022).

In addition, digital feminist activists engage not only in digital spaces for their activism but also in offline in-person outlets as catalysts or triggers for founding their movements, recruiting members and mobilising for offline activism. Although their first point of contact for activism was the digital space, digital feminists still used traditional media spaces for different reasons. They extended their activities to traditional platforms because of the limitation of the digital spaces in terms of access. While social media undeniably has a significant reach as compared to traditional media, it is only accessible to a distinct population who have access to digital devices and the Internet, and who are literate enough to read and understand the messaging being sent. This meant a significant population size was excluded by virtue of their literacy levels, economic class, geographical positioning and access to the Internet. Pepper Dem Ministries, for instance, have employed radio programmes on class FM to discuss women's issues and hold intergenerational discussions on feminism, and door-to-door interactions to educate on women's issues. #HijabIsanIdentity conveners have also engaged in physical marches, radio engagements and door-to-door outreaches to educate and mobilise people.

We use all the areas from social media to the traditional media, which is TV and radio; we protest in person, we march, etc., in trying to reach the intended target, and it is not the woman who wants to wear the hijab. However, it is the institution that has the final say in what goes on in schools, workplaces, etc. So, we use all forms of media (Xalia 2022⁶).

Okay, we have used Facebook, Twitter, and others, but mostly these two and outreaches, door-to-door, then town hall meetings, but not in Accra; we have yet to be able to have such meetings in Accra (Akuamoah 2022⁷).

Using these grassroots spaces or off-new media platforms debunks assertions that young people's advocacy is limited to social media spaces. "Every time people countered our narrative, they said go to Gambaga, go on the ground and dismiss online advocacy" (Plange 2022⁸). It is worth noting that the reverse in sequence exists between the two generations. In the cases where movements have used media spaces in the past, it has been mainly as a tool for knowledge dissemination and transfer. Mobilisation was therefore conducted outside media spaces. However, in the case of current feminist activism, the social media spaces are where most engagements occur, notwithstanding the use of other conventional spaces to raise awareness about the movements.

Another similarity between the two movements was the shared personal and professional spaces of their members, which enabled the easy establishment of the movement through social media and its travel into a physical space. Pioneer feminists shared these similarities and also established contacts through their direct circles. They also, as with the pioneer movement, employed convenorship as a tool for mobilising and carrying out their activism. Such convenors served as leaders of the movements.

The major differences in these movements have been the points of initiating relationships and the outputs generated. Digital feminists initiated their relationships on social media through personal and professional circles, while pioneer feminists initiated their movement offline. Further, most older movements have scholarship connected to the activist work produced, either in conventional academic scholarship or in legal approaches. However, this is not usually the case with the movements engaged by the younger generation. It is generally not common for the younger generation of feminists to connect their activist work with traditional academic scholarship, although there are a

few exceptions, such as Efe Plange and Basiratu-Kamal Muslim. Most of the scholarly work on this movement has been conducted by individuals who are not part of the movement.

Why the choice of the tools and approaches: Agenda setting and/or user gratification?

Evidence has indicated that social media has cut across diverse endeavours (Apuke and Tunca 2022), and feminist activism is no different. With the rise of feminist blogs and the increase in the use of the internet as platforms for establishing social networks, activism and organising, Léveillé refers to a fourth feminist wave, acknowledging the rise of feminist activism through digital technologies (2021). These new or social media outlets allow younger feminists to reach a larger audience instantly at a negligible cost. The digital space, therefore, presents itself as a good platform for activists to set agendas, and to envisage and target specific or multiple audiences while pursuing their feminist goals. Matusitz and Ochoa (2018) argue that social media can determine the salience of topics in the public domain based on the perceived relevance of the issues presented to recipients. Ogunyombo (2015) describes this agenda-setting as the capability of the media to capture the importance of an issue in the public's mind.

Drawing from the agenda-setting theory, the depth of coverage and frequency assigns significance, informing reactions. Although McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study was more aligned to traditional media platforms, it proves itself to be as relevant today as in the 1970s, where an indicated correlation between the study participants' viewpoint and subjects of media coverage is one of the pertinent reasons for the choice of social media as an organising tool. Agenda-setting pushes across messages as thought through by organisers and activists. It informs their call to pursue specific interests as informed by trends and events that serve as goal-setting triggers. This argument leads to the discussion of Blumler and Katz (1974), who advocate that people use certain media based on the gratification they derive, and place power in the hands of the users. So, it explains the choice of particular social media platforms based on their attractiveness and ability to hold users' attention and satisfy their needs. That the organisers carry out their activities on X and mostly Facebook, rather

than on other social media platforms, opens up the rationale behind using specific digital spaces with attention to the target audience, what feminist activists need to achieve, and what the chosen platform presents. We explored in this study the factors influencing their choices of spaces, communication modalities employed, and the relationship between the choices of outlets and approaches by pioneer and digital feminists. While the agenda-setting, uses and gratification theories are more germane to media analysis, we use them to explore how these feminists choose their tools and what is considered.

Both generations of activists have chosen and employed the spaces they engaged with, influenced first by the events of the time and second by the assumed reach relevance and effectiveness of the chosen tactics. Pioneer feminist activists are more inclined towards issues that inform policy, and their use of gender-related taught courses, for example, was a strategy to bridge theory with practice (Takiyiwah Manuh as featured in Tamakloe 2022), which helped reach activists and equip them with the theoretical lenses required for their work. Coalition building helped amass the necessary numbers of women and activists to champion women's rights and introduce laws and policies. The Domestic Violence Coalition and the WMC have been fine examples (Mama 2005; Tsikata 2009).

Sharing the reasons for their choices, digital feminists offer various justifications for their single-use or blended approaches (online and offline) to activism. Key in these stories is the reach social media offers activists. They acknowledge social media's ability to reinvent and push for the regeneration of discussions as if they are new. The immediacy of use to propagate issues and results was one reason for using the platforms of interest. While social media activism covers several tools, YouTube, Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, among others, two key platforms were the choices for these activists- X (Twitter) and Facebook.

Okay, so for Facebook and Twitter, it is the reach. Social media is now the fastest way to spread information, for good or bad, and there have been other benefits, such as being in real-time. So, for the immediacy of it, social media has been an enormous help. However, then, ...the social issues we were targeting were something that had been highlighted before but had not been amplified to that level (Danso 2022⁹).

Feminist Activism in Ghana: The Challenges Therein

Feminist activism in Ghana has made numerous gains, from behaviour changes and formulation of laws and policy to knowledge creation. These gains notwithstanding, feminist activism seems to be accompanied by pushback, irrespective of the period. Tsikata (2009) attributes this to the kinds of issues pushed by feminist activists:

... gender activists are accepted as long as they focus on programmes such as credit for women, income-generation projects and girls' education and couch their struggles in terms of welfare or national development. Once they broach questions of power relations or injustices, they are accused of being elitist and influenced by foreign ideas alien to African culture (Tsikata 2009,186).

Affirming Tsikata's assertion on the focus of activism being a source of discomfort and leading to unfavourable reactions, participants recounted pushbacks faced during the organising of the movements:

I think no matter what period, feminism has always encountered pushback because upsetting the status quo is something the establishment doesn't want. Because when you upset the status quo when it comes to women's issues, the link to other issues is easily drawn, and I honestly think because of the existence of Pepper Dem, other movements and whatever have had the kind of radicalisation that they have right because we became a sort of blueprint that when you are controlling and disruptive and fierce and standing in it towards upsetting the status quo you will get the attention you desire and deserve. You would influence minds towards change, so even with Pepper Dem, we experienced repressive tactics from various sources. It is not different from what other movements are going through; there are so many similar actions of pressure groups around (Danso 2022 ¹⁰).

Our analysis shows that the challenges faced by feminists do not change because of the space occupied or the approaches used. They, however, escalate depending on the issues addressed. Pioneer feminists and digital feminists alike encounter a range of attacks, from insults and name-calling, such as being labelled as misandrists and prostitutes, to more serious threats of death and of the termination of jobs. "They call you names such as Ashawo" (Felicity Nelson as featured in NETRIGHT 2021). Bashiratu Kamal-Muslim, a convener of #HijabIsanIdentity

also expressed on her social media handle how threats to her life extended to her family. Recounting in our interview a similar experience to that of Felicity and Bashiratu concerning how social media makes an activist vulnerable to attacks, Plange notes:

Facebook gives everyone access to your account; there was a lot of bullying, insult, and body shaming; we received threats, rape threats, physical harm etc. It reached the point that when we went out, we could only post pictures of where we were once we'd left the place. Also, even though it's an organisation, the individual founding members became the face of the movement, so even if someone posts something personal on her page, it is seen as the group has done that, so it got to the point that we couldn't have our individual opinion that didn't allude to PDM.¹¹

These attacks have come from women and men, both young and old. In response to Pepper Dem Ministries, for example, influential women in the media set up "Sugar Dem" movements to counter the narratives. Female gospel musicians who disagreed with the approach of Pepper Dem Ministries openly declared their stand in support of the men's superior position in society (Piesie Esther and Sika 2019). While most challenges come from external sources, others sometimes emanate from the group. "Another thing was that feminism has a very negative connotation in Ghana, so not everybody was comfortable being openly associated with it and agreeing that it's a feminist movement then the movement had to cater and respond to queer issues and not every member was bold to take a particular position for queer, abortions, etc. lives because lesbians are women" (Danso 2022¹²).

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to explore the connections, commonalities, differences, and challenges faced by pioneering feminist activists from the 1980s to 2017 and digital feminist activists from 2017 to the present. We sought to guide conversations and debates on whose feminism matters in Ghana, particularly in documenting the historical significance of these two movements and identifying the resources and importance they offer to feminist activism in Ghana. The paper teased out the connections, commonalities, and differences between pioneer feminist activists from the 1980s to 2017 and digital feminist activists from 2017 to date; we also explored the challenges faced by both groups. We explored the differences between the interests of pioneer and digital feminists, acknowledging the theoretical situating of issues by the older feminist activists and their inclination towards policy-oriented issues.

The digital feminist movements explored were centred on resistance and protests around bodily autonomy, identity, and patriarchal norms internalised across generations. We aimed to show that despite the seeming disconnect in appreciating the spaces employed by multiple activists in Ghana, they may not be that different in focus, tactics, and approach, and that the various techniques offer resources and importance to activism and women's rights in Ghana. We compared the tools and approaches used by feminist activists in Ghana, analysed the commonalities and differences in these outlets, and examined how these outlets are used to set agendas and ensure the sustenance of target audiences' interests. Focusing on intergenerational shifts regarding feminist modalities, we conclude that while feminist organising in Ghana is evolving to include digital spaces, digital feminist activism in the country is a continuation of older forms of organising. Its modalities for organising and the issues pursued mirror and build on those of the pioneer feminists. We, therefore, align ourselves with the calls for movements to build on each other.

Notes

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3. Adomako Ampofo, Akosua. Keynote Address. The African Women's Development Fund Reflections on Generations of Sisterhood: International Women's Day 2018. British Council, Accra. 8 March 2018)
4. Plange, Efe. Interview by Loretta Baidoo. Zoom Recording. Halifax, 3 July 2022
5. Plange, Efe. Interview by Loretta Baidoo. Zoom Recording. Halifax, 3 July 2022
6. Hajia Xalia. Interview by Amanda Odoi. Google Meet Recording. Accra, 12 July 2022
7. Akuamoah, Jayjay. Interview by Amanda Odoi. Zoom Recording. Cape Coast, 28 June 2022
8. Plange, Efe. Interview by Loretta Baidoo. Zoom Recording. Halifax, 3 July 2022
9. Danso, Amazing Grace. Interview by Loretta Baidoo. Zoom Recording. Halifax, 9 July 2022
10. Danso, Amazing Grace. Interview by Loretta Baidoo. Zoom Recording. Halifax, 9 July 2022
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Cleopatra, Egyptology, and Afrocentrism: A Bitter Tripartite

Radwa Saad

Abstract

This essay explores the tensions surrounding Afrocentrism in Egypt, exemplified by recent controversies over depictions of Cleopatra in cinematic productions. It examines the clash between Egyptian nationalist narratives and Afrocentric interpretations of ancient Egypt's Black heritage and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of race when navigating complex historical legacies.

Keywords: Afrocentrism; Cleopatra; ancient Egypt; historical revisionism; Arab-African relations; identity politics

In Egypt's ongoing feud with the Afrocentrism movement, the government has banned Dutch archaeologists from carrying out excavations in the country over their involvement in an exhibition that traced the influence of ancient Egypt on Black musicians such as Beyonce and Rihanna (BBC News 2023). Many following the feud view this as a response to the massive public backlash provoked over the recent launch of *Queen Cleopatra* – a Netflix documentary series produced by Jada Pinkett Smith. The documentary cast Cleopatra as a Black African Queen in what the director Tina Gharvi (2023) described as a deliberate political act.

The intimate entanglements between gender, race, and nationalism are palpable to feminists following these debates. At the heart of most contemporary nationalist mythologies is a desired proximity to Whiteness. Efforts to establish ethnic homogeneity, heteronormativity, and some degree of historical revisionism and civilisational gatekeeping sustain these narratives. After all, nation-states are European constructs. To quote Jemima Pierre (2013, xiv), “How could any

postcolonial society not be structured by its legacy of race and racialization—especially when colonialism was, in the most ideological, political, and practical way, racialized rule?”

In recent decades, nationalist mythologies are being deconstructed by previously marginalised groups empowered through the forces of globalisation. *Queen Cleopatra* was not only an attempt to reframe the narrative around a powerful ruler objectified throughout history, but also an invitation for Egyptians to (re)imagine themselves as Black – one that was not well received. As remarked by Tina Gharvi (2023), “The HBO series ‘Rome’ portrayed one of the most intelligent, sophisticated and powerful women in the world as a sleazy, dissipated drug addict, yet Egypt didn’t seem to mind. Where was the outrage then? But portraying her as Black? Well [that’s a different story]”.

It is difficult to overlook the blatant anti-Blackness emanating from some of these public discussions. Take, for example, the counter-documentary on Cleopatra, featuring Egypt’s most prominent archaeologist Zahi Hawass released on the same day as the Netflix docu-series. The production focused on proving that the Ptolemaic dynasty’s last ruler was primarily of Greco-Macedonian descent while debunking any correlation between Egypt and Blackness. In fact, Hawass argued, “the enemies [of Ancient Egypt] were always Asiatic, Africans, and Libyans”, with Africans being synonymous with Blacks in his interpretation (Woodside 2023 23:49 – 27:10). He even goes as far as to dismiss the legacies of the Kushite Dynasty that ruled Egypt for nearly a century.

These Black Pharaohs, according to Hawass, “had nothing to do with its [Egypt’s] great accomplishments such as the construction of temples and the pyramids.” (Woodside 2023, 23:49:00). The biggest irony lies in Hawass’s claim that Cleopatra was not Egyptian. Why divert energy and resources towards rectifying alleged historical fallacies over a figure he claims is not Egyptian to begin with? There are numerous examples of Egyptian queens with a less contested ethnic background whose stories have received little attention. The fact that both Hawass and Jada Pinkett Smith decided to produce yet another rendition of a figure so fetishised throughout history is an example of how Western standpoints and epistemologies continue to govern the issues worthy of our attention.

However, it would be erroneous to dismiss all Egyptian reactions as mere expressions of racism or internalised White supremacy. The virtual exclusion of any Egyptian commentators in the Netflix casting is another example of how they are systemically marginalised from debates regarding their cultural heritage. Egyptians have resisted the racialisation, misrepresentation, erasure, and/or appropriation of their history by different actors continuously for decades. In the past, these grievances were channelled towards the Eurocentrism advocated by Westerners, but now they are increasingly directed towards the Afrocentrism promoted mainly by African Americans – a staunchly disappointing contrast to the transnational Afro-Arab solidarities characterising the era of decolonisation.

What many Pan-Africanist Egyptians like me are opposing is not the association of ancient Egypt with Blackness, but the Afrocentrist movement's insistence that ancient Egypt was *originally* and *exclusively* a Black civilisation. This position is a form of resistance to the Western understandings of race and identity and the related notions of Whiteness and Blackness that are consistently imposed on an ancient world and on a contemporary society that views these issues differently. Most Egyptians identify as neither White nor Black but as the product of a melting pot of influences. Pharaonic history is just as central to the Egyptian nationalist imaginary as Coptic, Arab, Muslim, African and Mediterranean influences. However, Egyptians consistently find themselves enmeshed between racial boundaries imposed by Eurocentrists and Afrocentrists alike. Egyptology has been permeated with hegemonic Western understandings of race that minimise Egyptians' agency in narratives over their cultural heritage and self-understanding.

To portray ancient Egypt as “White” or “Black” is to project contemporary racial sensibilities onto a past where such differences were yet to acquire their saliency. After all, race is a modern construct that only dates back to the Enlightenment era of the 17th century. The ancients certainly had their means of categorising human differences, but they did not make distinctions on the basis of race; nor were differences in complexion imbued with the same social meaning attributed to them now (Appiah 1992). Even in the modern world, race cannot be understood as a monolith. While anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon, understandings of race vary drastically across contexts. Although darker-skinned Afro-Arab minorities across North Africa are continuously subject to racism,

they do not necessarily embody a political Black consciousness (Ltif 2021), partially because racism was not institutionalised in African states in the same way it has been in the US. Yet Western understandings of race are continuously exported to and imposed on the continent, a tragedy whose manifestations are easily observable in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In their effort to brand ancient Egypt as a Black civilisation, the Afrocentrism movement of the 1970s took a clear anti-Arab and anti-Islamic turn. The prominent Afrocentrist scholar Molefi Asante (1985), for instance, argued that “The Arabs, with their jihads, or holy wars, were thorough in their destruction of much of the ancient [Egyptian] culture” and that Egyptian knowledge was preserved through priests forcefully displaced further south down the continent (p.5). According to this plot line, contemporary Egyptians have diverse shades of complexion because they are the descendants of White and Arab conquerors who are keen on destroying Pharaonic history and displacing its inhabitants.

Such arguments continue to be perpetuated despite ample scholarly work that refutes the existence of a racially homogeneous North Africa. Even Cheikh Anta Diop (1987, 102), whose work is considered foundational to Afrocentricity, described allegations of Arab armies invading Black Africa as divisive “figments of the imagination”. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Egyptians are triggered by narratives that not only rob them of claims to their Pharaonic lineage but also serve to cast them as enemies of a civilisation so intimately tied to their national identity and self-understanding. As one Cairo-based Egyptologist wrote to express her discomfort with Afrocentrist influence:

I have heard outright Egyptologists and museum curators in the West, in personal correspondences, panel discussions, conferences and on social media shut down discussion of the repatriation of artefacts using these bogus claims about the “racial differences” between ancient and modern Egyptians or because Egyptians are Arab invaders ... Some of this is good old Eurocentrism but a very significant portion of it is Afrocentrism (as cited by Hisham Aidi 2022).

Aside from issues of (mis)representation, there is another reason why Egyptians are threatened by the Afrocentrist movement’s growing influence: its activity in Nubian territories is perceived as a potential source of sectarianism. African Americans have taken an immense interest in Nubian culture over the years, in

part driven by the belief that the darker complexion of Nubians makes them the “true descendants” of Pharaonic Egypt. As inspiration is drawn from Egyptology to uplift African Americans through historical revisionism, Nubian populations and territories have become iconic centrepieces in the representation of these new ideas. For example, Kemetic yoga – a brand of yoga purported to have originated in Pharaonic texts and practices – was developed by African Americans in the 1970s. As the practice has gained popularity, Nubian territories have become a hub for Kemetic yoga retreats. The increased presence of African Americans coming to introduce Nubians – many of whom have never heard of yoga – to the “lost” elements of their history and culture bears semblance to an all too familiar civilising mission exercised by members of the Black diaspora in the past.

Nubians occupy a sensitive yet crucial position in the Egyptian national imagination. On the one hand, the “authenticity” of the Nubian culture is widely celebrated and cast as an example of the modern state’s claim to its ancient heritage, even if these depictions are imbued with racialised and essentialist undertones (Smith 2006). On the other hand, the massive displacement of Nubian populations in the 1960s to make way for Nasser’s construction of the High Dam evokes grievances that can easily be rekindled through external meddling. Activists and authorities fear that the dissemination of “counterfeit” history will polarise Nubian youth and tear the country’s national fabric. In 2022 for example, the hashtag #stopafrocentricconference began trending over the “One Africa: Returning to the Source” conference that was scheduled to take place at Aswan University. Egyptian activists argued that Aswan was deliberately chosen by the Afrocentrism movement to exploit the country’s ethno-cultural differences and alienate Nubian youth from Egyptian society (Aidi 2022).

The solution, however, is not to cancel conferences and excavations but to create space for respectful dialogue while understanding the origins of the Afrocentrist movement. At its core, Afrocentrism is an epistemological project – one that challenged the separation of the Black diaspora from Africa that was used to sustain the notion of a slave as a “genealogical isolate.” (Patterson 1982, 5). In locating the origins of modernity in ancient Egypt, Afrocentrists disrupted the conventional thread of history itself (Balakrishnan 2020). In this sense, Pan-Africanist Egyptians and Afrocentrists have more in common than conventionally portrayed. Both reject the notion of an “Africa without a past”

by offering a critique of modernity that emphasises the contributions of the Global South to world history and to the birth of Western civilisation. However, Afrocentrists do so by (re)associating Blackness with Africa but at the expense of disassociating Arabness - as well as Amazigh-ness and other North African identities - from Africa and indigeneity.

In theorising intersectionality, Patricia Collins (1990) locates lived experiences of oppression within the social contexts that produce them. Black Feminist thought is bounded by the particular trajectory of American political history. However, it also provides conceptual tools for examining the particularistic nature of different women's struggles, without losing sight of the universal mechanisms that bind them. The dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric masculinist thought stipulated that "one must be either Black or White" so that privilege becomes defined in relation to its other. Persons of ambiguous racial and ethnic identity are systemically "othered" while "constantly [battling] with questions such as 'What are you, anyway?'" (Collins 1990, 221-238). This hierarchy of domination is at the heart of both African American and Arab-Muslim women's humiliation and debasement in the West. Both groups continue to occupy a marginal position in a global economy that continues to shape their material realities, and both are concerned with a radical reimagining and restructuring of power relations. These commonalities ought to be emphasised in discussions.

Cairo was once a hub for liberation movements across the African continent and members of the Black diaspora. It hosted a number of African American intellectuals, including Malcolm X, Shirley Graham, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Maya Angelou, who saw their fates as intimately tied to the Nasserist revolution and the Third-World movement. Mutual respect, dialogue, and recognition of the economic systems of oppression at the heart of their interwoven plights made these transnational alliances possible. Now more than ever, it is important to (re)centre a material analysis of power and lean into the feminist tradition of alliance-building.

One can sympathise with African Americans regarding their plight while challenging their reading of race relations in other sociopolitical contexts. One can appreciate Pharaonic history while condemning the government's populist efforts to exploit the past in the face of a severe legitimacy crisis. One can resist the racialisation of Egypt's ancient history without being blind to how race

operates and dictates our self-understanding in the present. Africa has been and always will remain an eclectic mosaic of colours, cultures, and civilisations that ought to be celebrated equally and understood on their own terms. If Cleopatra was Egyptian merely because she assimilated into Egyptian culture despite her contested heritage, then *Africanness* is more encompassing than many are willing to concede.

Note

1 Only one commentator in the Netflix Documentary *Queen Cleopatra* was a British national with Egyptian roots. He accused the directing crew of concealing information from commentators and politicising the casting. “What right does she [the director] have to tell Egyptians how to view themselves?”, he wrote in a rebuttal. See Issa, Islam (2023) ‘Cleopatra was Egyptian – Whether Black or Brown Matters Less’, Aljazeera retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/5/1/cleopatra-was-egyptian-whether-black-or-brown-matters#:~:text=Even%20Cleopatra's%20foremost%20European%20biographer,olive%20or%20light%20brown%20-complexion%E2%80%9D>.

2 This is evident in debates regarding the repatriation of stolen artefacts, in the erasure of ancient Egyptian influences on ancient Greece and Rome, and by extension Western civilisation, in reactions to Hollywood’s decision to cast an Israeli actor Gal Gadot as Cleopatra, and in refutations to claims that Jewish populations built the pyramid, to name a few examples.

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In Conversation

Her Excellency Professor Abena P. A. Busia interviewed Bernardine Evaristo, author of the 2019 Booker Prize-winning *Girl, Woman, Other*, during the 3rd Kwame Nkrumah Festival at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. Themed “Pan Africanism, Feminism, and the Next Generation: Liberating the Cultural Economy”, the festival was held from 15 to 24 September 2021.

H.E. Abena Busia (APAB): Hello everybody and thank you for joining us, wherever in the world you're joining us from. My name is Abena Busia. I am a Ghanaian, very proud to be so, a Ghanaian writer and poet, and currently Ghana's ambassador to Brazil. I am very, very honoured today, however, to be part of this festival and to interview a friend of mine, an extraordinary woman herself who today is best known for co-winning the 2019 Booker Prize with her eighth book, *Girl, Woman, Other*, making her the first Black woman to win it. But for some of us, her reputation preceded that. For some of us, she is a person who is a trailblazer and a visionary who has helped put Black women writers – particularly those writing out of Britain – on the map. She is visionary, she is feisty, and she has an acute sense of the politics of being and the politics of representation. Yet in all of that, her wit and her wisdom have brought to consciousness the place of those of us Black people of African descent growing up in England – the way we negotiate our identities, the way we negotiate the politics of space, the way we interact intergenerationally and between ourselves [which] has been, for some of us, the food of life.

Her first non-fiction book, *Manifesto*, on never giving up, is to be published next month. And she has taken that wit and wisdom so many places, including, most crucially, the academy, where today she is professor of creative writing at Brunel University in London and vice-president of the Royal Society of Literature.

Bernardine, it is wonderful to see you, and welcome you to this space from London.

Bernardine Evaristo (BE): Hi! I wish I was there too! And I am really looking forward to being interviewed by you and I am really excited to be part of this amazing conference.

APAB: I know you must be aware of the fact that after your decades of labour in the shadows, the Booker Prize has changed your life. That goes without saying, I think. But I would like to begin, not with the Booker Prize, but with your beginnings. I would like [some] background to what makes you a writer and what makes you engage with the ideas and the themes that you do in your works. I guess that's a shorthand way of saying, what made you write your first book? (*laughing*)

BE: Yes, yes. Well, you know, my background obviously shaped me as our backgrounds often do. I was raised in the sixties and seventies in Woolwich in South East London, which is like Little Lagos today, but it wasn't when I was growing up. My Nigerian father was basically the only Black man in the village, and we were one of the only Black families there – mixed race family because my mother is White – so I grew up in a society where I didn't really fit in, or I wasn't seen to fit in. I was, of course, a British child but I had brown skin. And I think that sense of not fitting in has been instrumental in terms of the kinds of creativity and works that I produced as an adult. At the age of 12, I went to my local youth theatre, and I *did* fit in there. I was the only Black child or child of colour for most of my time there, but I felt very welcome, it was a safe space, a creative space, and that was my introduction to my creativity.

Just to say that I came from a very political background. My father was political in terms of being a local labour counsellor; he was a shop steward. My mother was a trade union rep at the school where she taught. She was a teacher, and my father was a welder in a factory. So, I grew up in a family where we challenged the status quo, where my parents were activists, they were social justice warriors, if you like. And that began when they married because marrying as a Black and White couple in the 1950s was a serious act of rebellion on my mother's part; her family did not approve.

So, I got into theatre, went to drama school, encountered four other Black women, which was more than I had encountered in my life, pretty much previously, other than my sisters – I have three sisters and four brothers – so I became

very politicised, I became very feminist and left drama school, formed a theatre with Black women and began my professional career writing for theatre, writing plays by and about Black women. I eventually left theatre behind and then started writing books. My first book, *Island of Abraham*, was published in 1994. So, my childhood and heritage led me to become the kind of writer I became, which was somebody who wanted to write about the African diaspora, and to tell those stories I hadn't been told and explore all those hidden histories, and that's what I have been doing ever since!

APAB: Yes, and we will come back to that and the matter of your hidden histories. But I now want to ask a question about something that not many people think and talk about. And that is, what is a catholic grasp, if you like, of the place of Black writers in British society? I had the privilege of hearing you speak, five years ago, at [the] African Literature Association conference in Germany and I remember being struck by your keynote speech, about the way you could so clearly map the progress of Black writing, the recognition of Black writing and the issues that Black writers had taken on in the public space: naming the challenges and difficulties you face in the sense of not just *what* you wrote but *that* you wrote at all, that you existed at all. And I was wondering if you could share a little bit of that activist part of the collectivity before we return to the question of your personal creativity.

BE: Yes, that keynote speech was looking at Black British women's literature; it's something that I have been very aware of, obviously, because of who I am, all my life. And there has been an absence of it for most of my life. Very few exceptions. I am one of the few exceptions. And so, I am really interested in creating a more inclusive publishing culture and making sure that people of colour, women of colour, Black women, more specifically, are represented in the publishing world. That's something I have been doing as an activist for a very long time.

If people want to access something about Black British women's history, then you can find it in an essay I wrote, bits of it were extracted in *The Guardian* about two years ago. That might give you an overview of the history of the literature. It's so important that we do see ourselves represented in the literature. But for somebody who was Black British growing up at the time that I did, we didn't see ourselves. And it's very important to say that because unless you grew up at that time in Britain, you're unlikely to understand or appreciate that. It's not like if I was

growing up in Nigeria where, actually, there was a body of literature, or Ghana or other parts of Africa, even though women, we know, are still underrepresented. But in Britain there simply was almost no Black representation in literature. And what existed was often by people who had come to Britain as adults and were then writing about their home countries. One exception [was] Buchi Emecheta, although most of her body of work was about Nigeria where she came from. If we have to talk about a mother of Black British writing, we have to say Buchi Emecheta because she arrived, I think in 1960 or so and published about twenty books, and even though she was sidelined by the literary establishment, she was an important literary figure in our history. But in terms of people being born or raised in Britain and writing from that perspective, there was almost a dearth of literature. And that's why when I started, when I went to drama school and started writing for theatre, that's one of the reasons why I was writing Black women's theatre, because it was like, well, if we don't do it, it's never going to exist and there's nothing for us to perform anyway because the idea of cross-racial casting wasn't really as prevalent then as it is now. And so, I have traced the history, the genesis of our literature through the decades. In the nineties, we had a bit of an upsurge, a bit of a moment and then a lot of those writers disappeared. And we're going through a bit of an upsurge now on a very different scale, a much, much larger scale. So, it is as if finally the publishing industry has woken up to the fact that we are around, we've got stories to tell, that people want to buy those stories, and that it's really important that we are included in the publishing world. I won't go into my activism, but I have set up various arts inclusion projects over the decades that have been working towards this moment, along with other people who have also set up projects.

APAB: And that's important. I do want us to turn to your own writing, but I have to acknowledge that it is characteristic of you not only that you have been an activist but that you always acknowledge the people that you've been working with, and the importance of a collective voice and solidarity has always been part of your work which some of us really appreciate. I'm going to extrapolate something from that, that may or may not be true, and that is: I see that collectivity actually in the structure of your novels. I am thinking in particular of *Mr. Loverman* and *Girl, Woman, Other* and the way in which you are so consciously giving us plural voices and different perspectives engaged in a sort of common

project. That is, the question of community is always there, but the different voices of that community are what you're trying to share and give us. Is that fair to say?

BE: I think so. I tend to talk about communities, rather than [the] singular, although we can talk about community broadly as well. *Girl, Woman, Other*, for example, is a polyvocal novel, everyone acknowledges that [with] 12, primarily Black British women, one of whom is non-binary. But polyvocality is something that is sewn throughout all my work. So, the big project for me is the African diaspora. And I always say to people that that is not limiting. And that is what I talk about in my book *Manifesto* actually, because people have said to me, "When are you going to move beyond writing about Black people?" (*APAB and BE laugh*) I have to remind them about the billion or so Black people on the African continent and then the rest of the world as well. There are only sixty million British people and nobody would even dream of suggesting that to a White British writer who only writes White British fiction with no Black or Asian characters, that they are somehow limiting. So that field, the African diaspora, is broad and vast and historical, goes back to prehistory and goes into the future and so many different communities, and you know I have a particular interest in Britain, but my work also spans the world in many ways; different characters come from different parts of the world. I take my characters or situate [them] in different parts of the world and that is really important to me because we are about multiplicity. And one of the most damaging things [about] being racialised as Black in this world, is that it is often very reductive or very stereotypical. If you are Black, you are a particular kind of person and it's very restricting and it can be very oppressive. So, I am telling lots of different kinds of stories. Some of them are fantastical in the sense that they create alternate universes. You mention *Mr. Loverman*. He is a seventy-four-year-old gay Caribbean London man who has lived in London for 50 years; he's with his lover Morris [with whom he's] been together 60 years, married to his wife Carmel 50 years; [he is a] father and grandfather. It's the end of his marriage, she doesn't know he's gay. So, I'm telling this story, this very buried aspect of Black British history or Black British culture which is an older, gay Caribbean man or gay Black man who has led this secret life the whole of his life. Those are the kinds of stories that excite me. Or *The Emperor's Babe*, which was published in 2001, and it's about a Black girl who grows up in Roman London 1,800 years ago, because there were Africans

in Britain 1800 years ago. And that was my starting point for that character. And when I created the character, I was told that there were no Black people in Roman London, which is crazy because Rome was a multicultural city-state. The Roman Empire stretched over thousands of miles. Britain was a Roman colony – why wouldn't there have been Black people in Roman London? A few years after the book was published, they discovered there were Black people in Roman London, so I got there ahead of the historians and archaeologists. (*APAB and BE laugh*) There's so much, it's such a rich field to play with, and that's what I do, I play with it and explore so many different aspects.

APAB: Yes, which is really wonderful. As you say, history, time, space and so on. [Do] you have the novel in front of you?

BE: (*Laughs*) I do.

APAB: Great! Do you have a piece that you would like to read to us?

BE: Carole. A lot of people relate to Carole because she's a young woman in her late twenties who is occupying a space in the corporate world and so she is having to change who she is in order to fit into that world, which is primarily White and predominantly male. And she is of Nigerian heritage. Both her parents are Nigerian but immigrants and she's being brought up and raised in Peckham, South East London. She is very bright, she's mentored by teachers, she goes to Oxford, then she goes into banking. This is Carole on her way to work:

Carole

walks through Liverpool Street station with its inter-galactic glass and steel ceiling propped up by towering Corinthian columns

she's headed for the escalators and the soaring windows that let in a holy glow of morning light

she passes underneath the timetable board listing departures and arrivals articulated through the medium of glowing alphanumeric, text flipping and updating as announcements bellow from the clustered boom boxes informing passengers about platform numbers and itemizing all stations on routes to final destinations

where this train will end
and the numerous delays due to vandalism on the tracks or leaves
on the line or sun on the line or a body under a train
how very inconsiderate, not to her
to choose to throw yourself in front of a mechanical iron beast
weighing thousands of tons and racing at a top speed of one hundred and forty
miles per hour?
To choose such a brutal and dramatic finale
Carole knows what drives people to such despair, knows what it's
like to appear normal but to feel herself swaying
just one leap away
from
the amassed crowds on the platforms who carry enough hope in their
hearts to stay alive
swaying
just one leap away from
eternal
peace

That wasn't actually the best example, but anyway, that's Carole on her way to work.

APAB: It was a good piece because it creates the atmosphere and the vision. Carole is very interesting, of course, because she is the woman of disguises. The woman who has a secret that she needs to [or] feels she needs to keep quiet about in order to negotiate. I love her mother who is like, "I am a Nigerian and so are you, and we're not going to get past this, so let's..." The scenes with her mother and the ways in which the mother helps her re-find herself by dealing with, who is the person that you're going to marry. I will ask you now about the structure of this particular book and the multiple voices, the twelve different voices, all of whom are connected – some intimately, some tangentially. I am one of these

obsessive people that find myself going back, going “Oh! Oh! Oh yes! That was that person’s classmate” and “Oh yes! It’s the same teacher.” Going through all of that and trying to understand. I wonder, what inspired you to create the book that way and what was the kernel that made you in a sense move out and flourish from?

BE: It was because I was fed up with not seeing enough Black women in British literature. It’s very simple. It’s the same thing that I did when I was a drama student, you know, we were not there in the library, so I thought, well, I was going to create those stories. [I]t was my eighth book and I had written all kinds of other stories, but I hadn’t written a book solely dedicated to a number of Black British women and I thought, okay, let me do that, let me show the diversity and the multiplicity of who we are in this country. Or, give a sense of it because, of course, you cannot say that any single work is going to define who we are. So, I started with Carole, actually, and then her mother came into her story, and I thought, okay, her mother is going to be the second character. Then eventually her friend came into the story. LaTisha. So, then LaTisha also had her own section. And then Carole’s school teacher, Shirley, then came into the story, and she had her own section. So, it kind of grew in that way. And I was just trying to look [at] all the different ways I could represent these characters so that they are really distinct from each other. So, they have origins in countries in Africa; in countries in the Caribbean; some of them are direct immigrants (two of them are); some of them are mixed race; they grow up and live in different parts of the United Kingdom; they have different classes, different family set-ups, different sexualities – that was very important; I wanted to show a range of sexualities, not to have the usual heterosexual story there and nothing else. Also, as I said, one character in there is non-binary, so that was also important to explore. You’ve got twelve characters, eleven are women, one is non-binary, and they have different kinds of relationship set-ups, different occupations, they are different ages... so the youngest is 19 [and] the oldest is 93. But with each character – all coming of age in different eras – you see them from their childhood or even from before they are born through to the age that they are in the book. So, there’s a huge wealth of experience through the ages in the UK and also in some of the other countries of origin. So, it just became really fertile ground for exploring these characters and originally, I was going to have many more than twelve, but then

each woman has her own section – or their own section – and each section that they are given is about 30 pages, but you get a real sense of their whole lives in those 30 pages. And as you said, they are also interconnected, so there are four mother-daughter relationships out of the main characters but also many other mother-daughter relationships in the background of the stories; it was like creating a collage and trying to make all the pieces work well together and then a lot of very serious research to do that.

APAB: So, you started with Carole and not with Amma.

BE: Yeah, I did.

APAB: That's interesting.

BE: Amma actually begins the book. I just shifted the pieces around when I was editing it. I started [writing] with Carole because I am interested in how power works and Carole is somebody who has bought into the status quo. She loses something of herself, her childhood, the way she speaks, and her culture; she rejects it in order to buy into the status quo and become successful. And she is. And that was something that has interested me for a while, and she seems to embody that, and that is why I began with Carole. Amma is somebody of my generation, a theatre maker, she's a lesbian, she's had a very radical alternative lifestyle and she also is really interesting to me because she is the closest to myself when I was in my twenties. So, I was writing about the 1980s countercultural London scene that I was a part of, and I also knew that Amma would be completely unfamiliar to British readers other than those people who had gone through that era with me. I thought Amma would blow their minds because they would start reading about Amma and they would think, "Oh my God, who is she?!" You know, you hear about her background, which actually is part-Ghanaian, and this kind of squatting lifestyle, and [she's] very much a free spirit, very angry and radical and then she ends up, at my age, having a play at the National Theatre so she's basically joined the establishment in a sense but it's on her own terms. And I just knew that people wouldn't have encountered such a character because there are probably only two women around who are writing books who would write that character because we were around at that time. That would be Jackie Kay and myself. So that's why I started with [Amma]. And also, Carole has a very traumatic experience as a young girl and I didn't

want that to set the tone for the book. I didn't want it to be seen as a tragic book, even though because it is a book about Black women, some people assume it's about suffering. Some people have said to me, "Oh, it's a tragedy and it's about struggle and suffering" and I'm like, "No, no, it's not." And these people have not read it, they assume because this is about Black women, it's going to be tragic and traumatic. And well...

APAB: No, it's not.

BE: I know! But that's what they think.

APAB: It's so joyous. Yes, there's tragedy in it, whose life hasn't got tragedy? There's difficulty, there's confusion, there's "I wish I hadn't said that, I wish I had done that, I wish I had changed my mind" ... whatever... it's the way we live our lives.

I want to turn to the character whose section ends the book, who I call "M'gan"
(*laughs*)

BE: M'gan??

APAB: M'gan. M-apostrophe, then you don't have to decide whether it is M-O-R/ or M-E-G/ A-N

BE: Oh, I see, I see... I'm with you, then.

APAB: (*laughing*) Yes! But for me, that was in fact one of the wittiest and bravest parts of the book because of the way you make the person who is born in a Black woman's body and wants to critique that, be the person who is navigating the language and understanding the meaning of being non-binary and they are as confused as the rest of us. And I love that moment when she sort of discovers her community on the Internet and is trying to figure out how to talk about herself at that moment and keeps getting it wrong and keeps being politically incorrect and keeps being chastised. I love that because so many of us have gone through that. And to have *her* going through that so that we become part of her learning process so by the time she is insisting on being 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she', we understand it. I was wondering if you know the piece I'm talking about.

BE: Yes.

APAB: I was wondering if you could read a little bit of that computer exchange
(*laughs*).

BE: Okay, so let me find it.

BE: At this stage Morgan is Megan, still identifying as female but wondering about her gender and as you say, she's on the Internet trying to work things out, and she's talking to somebody called Bibi.

she found sanctuary in chat rooms with other young outsiders as
pissed off

as she was, discovered the trans world, engaged in conversations with
people on the trans spectrum

sometimes saying the wrong thing online, encountering someone
called

Bibi who wrote back, I'm going to hit the next person who confuses
transsexual with transgender, I swear! people won't tolerate igno-
rance on

here, love, transgender people are only transsexual when they med-
ically

transition, okay?

right

Fine

Megan clearly had to walk on eggshells or risk setting off a land mine,
none of it really made sense to her, weren't manhood and woman-
hood set in

stone? she asked Bibi

wrong again! Bibi replied, gender's a social construction, most of us
are

born male or female but the concepts of masculinity and femininity
are

society's inventions, none of it is innate, are you following?

no, not really

hey, it's actually 'Feminism 101', where you been, Megan? head in
the clouds?

yeh, 'spose so, living on Planet Parents, don't bite, btw, just curious
ah, a sensitive one, I'll go easy on you from now on, do your research,
seriously

It was interesting writing Megan who transitions to Morgan, non-binary, because I was learning about what that means while I was writing it and when I first wrote her section – wrote their section – I wrote it where Megan is already Morgan, already non-binary, and using the personal pronoun 'they'. And then I found that I kept tripping up over the use of the 'they' in the text and I just thought, "If I'm tripping up, the reader's going to trip up" so, I went back to her childhood and showed you her process of her transitioning, which you're talking about, and the journey she goes on and then eventually when Morgan becomes 'they', the reader gets it totally, they get where Morgan is coming from and yes, so Morgan walking on eggshells trying to find the right language to describe this new transgender world, it's difficult for them as it is for many of us. So, yeah, that's what I did, I put that dilemma in their hands (*laughs*).

APAB: (*laughing*) Well, you did it very well, I must confess. You do succeed in bringing us along. To the point where I am about to send your novel to somebody facing that dilemma. Because it's not easy on either side. And to be honest, yours was the first thing I read that made it so clear how difficult it was, but at the same time humanised the process both from the point of view of the person transitioning as well as the point of view of the people receiving them. Her grandmother's responses, the point where her grandmother says, "Look, love, I was born in the 1920s" or whatever it was, you know, "You do your thing but it's too late for me, I'm a hundred, take it or leave it!" (*APAB and BE laughing*) "I love you anyway, you can come to the farm but that... I've got other things to fight!" Which was also very [much] to the point. Her grandmother had had different things to negotiate, generations of displacement, fatherlessness or in her case, a father who didn't get it, and looking for her daughter for seventy years. So, again, the complexity of the stories that get bound up in this vision of "This is who we are and need to understand".

There are a couple of people who have identified themselves [in the chat], including the person who invited us both here, Amina Mama, and I just want to read what Amina says because I think it's important and it emphasises what you said when you introduced yourself and your origins. Amina has put up on the platform that she grew up between Nigeria and London, so the exactness of your portrayals hits her very deeply. And it is true that there was only Buchi Emecheta in those days, and [she's] celebrating the fact that our daughters and mothers have you to read. So that was her comment.

BE: Thank you.

APAB: Yes, I knew you wouldn't have had the chance to read that so I thought I would share it. Amina also said she loved *The Emperor's Babe*, so I want to go back to that just a little. You've talked about why you wrote that, but what went into being able to present that story in a way that was so convincing it made people challenge you?

BE: I had read a book called *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* by Peter Fryer published in about 1984. It was the first book I had read, although there were three or four books before that one, that looked at the deeper Black British history that, of course, we hadn't been taught in schools and we're still not taught in schools in the UK. He talks about a legion of Moors in the Roman army being stationed at Hadrian's Wall in the north of the country in 211 AD and that always stuck with me because the idea of Africans being in Britain nearly 2000 years ago, staying here, living here was just extraordinary at the point at which I read that book, which was in the 1980s. And so, I always thought, "Oh, this is so exciting, I want more people to know about it" and I didn't know how to put that information out there. *The Emperor's Babe* was published in 2001, so it was a long time later that I actually found the story that I wanted to tell, and it was like, "Okay, I'm going to put this Black girl in Roman London". A lot of the research was into Roman London and the Romans because there wasn't then, in the 1990s, much information written about Black people in the Roman Empire or Black people in Roman London, but there's a lot, there's a helluva lot of information about the Romans, of course. So, I did a lot of research, and you know, because I am a creative writer rather than an academic writer, the books that were most useful were things like *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* because as a writer you just want to imagine how people lived their lives. And so that book,

even though it was in Rome, I transplanted the culture to London, because a lot of it would have been transplanted. It would tell you what happened in the Romans' daily life from the minute they woke up to what happened while they were sleeping - what they slept on, how they washed, what kind of toilets they had, what make-up they wore, women and how did they do their hair, what clothes did they wear, what did they eat, right through to the end of the day. And that was brilliant because I was then able to create this really vivid picture of Roman London and put my character inside it. But yeah, I was using my imagination. And in this book, I also play around with history, so again, I have created an alternate universe; some of it is very true historically and some of it I have just made up so I can muck about. That's why I can never be an historian because I just muck about.

APAB: It's interesting though. I had a similar experience very, very recently. I am working on an epic poem, in fact, of Black women all over the place, the spirit of a Black woman from what is now Ghana who is following her lost daughters in all these spaces and through time. And I was so excited to discover that book about Black Tudors, Black people in Tudor England.¹ What excited me was looking at the timeline. I grew up in this little English country village outside Oxford which was part of the divorce settlement between Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves ... (*laughs*)... documented! And I found enough material in this book on Black Tudors to decide that one of my little daughters is going to get lost in Standlake in Anne of Cleves' manor house!

BE: Great! Great!

APAB: Those histories can be inspiring because they let us know, you know...

BE: You know, years ago, when I started acting, they would never cast people of colour in British period dramas because they said there were no people of colour. But "Cheddar Man" was a Black man; Cheddar Man is 10,000 years old, the fossils of Cheddar Man, this Black person, [are] 10,000 years old.

So, we have been here through time. And I think people are slowly starting to acknowledge that. And certainly, *Black Tudors* as well, those books that are bringing this history alive.

¹ Miranda Kaufmann. 2017. *Black Tudors: The Untold Story*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

APAB: Yes, it is liberating and so wonderful to find the historians supporting our imaginative lives.

BE: (*laughs*) Yeah.

APAB: I just want to acknowledge people who are slowly typing in [the chat] where they are. So, there are people, of course, here at the Institute [of African Studies, Legon], there's somebody in from Nigeria, somebody listening in from London, and people in the United States. Now, somebody's asking, Minna Salami who's listening from London says, "Thank you for such a compelling conversation." She enjoyed and loved *Girl, Woman, Other*. She says the book has been translated into numerous languages and she says, "I wondered if there has been anything that stands out for you in its reception in other cultures, especially in the African diaspora outside of the UK." A wonderful question.

BE: Okay. Hi Minna! I know Minna. Minna's the author of *Sensuous Pleasures* [sic]² which is a fantastic book about African feminism [and] spirituality. Everybody should go out and get that book.

[*Girl, Woman, Other*] is published in America and I have had responses there from African origin people and it's been very positive and very revelatory for them because I think in America, we are still pretty invisible as Black British people so people have said they have found it very informative and surprising, so that's good. And it's published in about 35 other languages and ongoing and it's very hard, actually, because you don't know how books are going down, you don't know what the translations are like; you don't know what they have done with your text so I haven't had a lot of responses at all almost from anywhere else in the world, from the African diaspora. Just occasionally individuals might get through because they speak English and they send me messages, but I don't really know, I just know that it's out there. It's very heartwarming to think that people are reading it and engaging with it, people of the African diaspora [who] may be in Korea or Georgia or Mongolia, but I don't really know what their responses are.

APAB: That's interesting that it already exists in 35 languages; that is very fast, that's wonderful.

2 Minna Salami. 2020. *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*. New York, NY: Amistad.

BE: I mean, yeah, that's amazing. Previously I had four books translated into four languages over the course of 26 years, so it's a change, it's a big change.

APAB: Yes, the glittering prizes are sometimes really wonderful.

BE: Absolutely. Life-changing.

APAB: Thirty-five. Which is the most surprising language for you, that it has been translated into?

BE: Actually, Mongolian.

APAB: Mongolian?

BE: Yeah, Mongolian!

APAB: Oh wow!

BE: It is extraordinary. You know, one of the covers for one of the languages in the Far East, they sent me the cover for approval and they made the cover look like a person from their country as opposed to a Black person. So, I sent it back. That's happened before. They're probably thinking, "Well, if it's got a Black person on the cover it's not going to sell in our country" so they put a person from their ethnic group on the cover. And it's like, "No, no, no, no, no, you're not doing that!" (*laughs*)

APAB: Interesting!

BE: Yeah, very interesting.

APAB: There's always that tension between, how shall I say it, fidelity and market sales, right? Really interesting.

APAB: Somebody else is asking if there's one character you could have written a whole novel about, one of your twelve characters.

BE: Oh, quite a few of them, actually. I think Amma, Yazz, Carole, Bummi, Shirley, Winsome...

APAB: All of them!

BE: Yeah, most of them... Can I just show you? This is my new book, *Manifesto*. Published on the seventh of October. It's called *Never Giving Up* as well. It's about how my life has been shaped by my creativity and vice versa.

APAB: Wonderful! Would you like to read something from that?

BE: Okay, let me do that.

APAB: We have a few [minutes] so in fact, that can be the closing remarks. That's exciting.

BE: Oh, let me just read from the introduction. Cos I am not used to reading from it.

APAB: (*laughs*) It's hot off the press! Thank you!

BE: Yeah, hot off the press. So, this is from my introduction:

Most people in the arts have role models – writers, artists, creatives – who have inspired them. But what are the other elements that lay the foundation for our creativity and steer the direction of our careers? This book is my answer to this question for myself, offering insights into my heritage and childhood, my lifestyle and relationships, the origins and nature of my creativity, and my personal development strategies and activism. For those who have only encountered my writing at this newly elevated point of arrival, this book reveals what it took to keep going and growing, and for those who have been struggling for a long time who might recognise their stories in mine, I hope you find it inspirational as you travel along your own paths towards achieving your ambitions.

Tada!

APAB: Thank you! That's a wonderful concluding statement. As always, motivating us to be inspirational and think about our own lives. On that note, I would like to thank all of you who are out there in different parts of the world, those of you who are in this room, for being here. This has been a privilege.

BE: Thank you.

APAB: Always, always, always uplifting to see and hear you, Bernardine. It matters to some of us that you are out there in the world, so keep on your journey, and thank you so much.

BE: Thank you!

***Prison Notebook V2957/88* by Gertrude Fester, 2022**

Self-published, 2022.

Desiree Lewis

South African feminist writer, Gertrude Fester, was among the group of political prisoners who spent over 100 days in solitary confinement on Robben Island in the mid-1980s. In what became known as the Yengeni Trial, the trial of this group of activists, as well as their detention, dramatic accusation for “treason” and incarceration (which for many included days of solitary confinement), was one of the high-profile displays of gross apartheid injustice at the height of the decades-long Afrikaner Nationalist rule in South Africa. Fester’s book reflects on all this while exploring her experiences growing up in apartheid South Africa. It also reflects on her political and professional career as a feminist and teacher in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond. The book is therefore striking in locating the author’s prison experiences within the context of several decades of African feminist intersectional struggle. In many ways, then, Fester can be seen to be contributing to what is known as an “inter-generational conversation” about feminist struggle; her battle is exemplified in her detention at the end of the twentieth century. At the same time, her struggle – as a feminist; a humanitarian committed to social justice; an African focused on the fate of this continent’s postcolonial reconstruction; and a lesbian sharply alert to sexual rights and justice – straddles several trajectories and periods. In this sense, it is reminiscent of the autobiographically inflected work of a feminist like the late Molaria Ogundipe Leslie (1940-2019), whose life, politics and writing reflected on colonial, authoritarian, and changing postcolonial injustices as well as the role of African feminism in a global context.

Prison Notebook V2957/88, authored by a feminist who is now in her seventies, reflects extensively on life in South Africa over several political periods, especially the 1950s (just after the introduction of apartheid rule), the late 1970s and the 1980s (the height of Black Consciousness and popular nation-wide

resistance to apartheid). To some, it may seem ill-placed in a journal issue dealing with new millennial African feminist struggles, for example, the repercussions of #MeToo, social media activism, and the political registers and concerns of African feminists two decades into the twenty-first century. Yet it is an urgent reminder of the necessity for comparative and historical thought about feminist struggles, about how different axes of injustice intersect or diverge at various moments, and the need to avoid rigidly separating contemporary feminist struggles from past ones. It is also, as the rest of this review will hopefully make clear, a vivid exemplification of how such struggles are to be represented and interpreted.

One of the fascinating and distinctive features of this text is its intriguing battle with modes of representing memory, trauma and the convolutions of feminist and queer-centred struggles within the context of brutal anti-racist, anti-ethnicist and anti-authoritarian mobilisation and action. Especially worth noting is that the writer does not focus only on her experiences in prison. In fact, the actual prison experiences are dealt with mainly in chapters 6 and 7, and, reaching beyond 1994 as a moment of post-apartheid democratic triumph, Fester takes us to a context where the biographer, still a determined scholar, teacher and human rights activist, reflects on injustices of the infamous regime. She also foregrounds her years of work in Rwanda where she taught and explored that country's efforts to heal, making the important point that post-apartheid South Africa has much to learn from other African states. The book leaves us with tantalising provocations about how and whether South Africa too – following the nightmares of apartheid – will be able to “heal” in the wake of the genocidal conflict. *Prisoner V2957/88* therefore locates Fester's prison experiences within the context of protracted activism in an African context, and the book is likely to appeal considerably to readers interested in South African and, broadly, African politics.

Prison Notebook V2957/88 contributes to African feminist writing about connected struggles for many other reasons. Fester's story deals with her childhood, upbringing, and early teaching and political life before she became active in women's organisations and the underground politics that culminated in her detention. Her impassioned and deeply personalised view of social and

political experiences in South Africa is striking. The life described around the author's prison experience includes the writer's role as an activist, a prisoner, a lover, daughter and sister, a "coloured" woman student and a teacher and academic navigating a tumultuous South Africa. It is therefore a textured social history, peeling back the layers of personal, familial and political experiences that confront African women. Consequently, the book is reminiscent of other South African autobiographies by black women (including Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali, Mamphela Ramphele and Emma Mashinini) as well as life histories by writers and activists from African countries including Nigeria (e.g., Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*, 1986), Kenya (e.g., Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, 2006), and Uganda (Miria Matembe's *Miria Matembe: Gender, Politics, and Constitution Making in Uganda*,). By disentangling personal experience, social context and the intricate gendered dynamics embedded in, for example, workerist, student-led or populist anti-racist or anti-authoritarian struggles, these women's life narratives provide herstories from below (Fester does in fact refer to her book as a "womanscript" on page 7). These invaluable complement the scholarship of historians, sociologists and others who often do *not*, in fact, convey quite the depth and nuance that the biographers do in their positioned accounts of injustice and resistance.

Contributing to this robust tradition of life writing, Fester also refuses to compartmentalise her roles and experiences in ways that could only invite passive reading. Instead, she seems to prompt readers to grapple – along with the author – with the human complexities linked to her developing activism. In comparison with other African women's autobiographies that I have read, this one delves especially deeply into the multiple and often conflicting subject positions of the writer: Fester unravels what it means to be queer at a time when this politicised identification could not be named – within the left and within feminism – as a politically tenable one. She therefore anticipates storytelling that seems to be surfacing only in fairly recent and still emerging film (one is reminded of the film *Rafiki*, for example); visual archives (the work of the photographer, Zanele Muholi, is of pivotal interest here); literary and academic studies (Zethu Matabeni's and Sylvia Tamale's academic work on African lesbian struggles, for example). Fester also foregrounds the distinct journeys of women anti-apartheid detainees and political activists, highlighting a thread that continues to be neglected in writing about prison and activist experiences in Africa.

The prison-writing tradition in Africa is dominated by male writers, who are typically remembered as defining prison experiences. If I were asked to recollect an African prison narrative it would be one authored by a man: Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nelson Mandela, Jack Mapanje and, more recently Kiriamiti's *My Life in Prison* (2004). Nawal el Sadwai's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* might be recalled by some readers familiar with autobiographically represented prison experiences in Africa, although this is probably not the most (conventionally) celebrated record of prison experiences by an African author. Of course, this does not mean that women have not had prison experiences to write about; in fact, one could imagine women writers extending the prison writing genre by describing incarceration both in conventional gaols and in benign spaces such as homes, workplaces or communities (something that Fester hints at sometimes). The public erasure of women in prison therefore has less to do with their lived experience than it does with a learned sense of altruism in relation to writing about imprisonment. Fester obliquely hones in on this gendered situation when she describes the separation of the women and men prisoners on Robben Island and the male prisoners' glaring entitlements and socially sanctioned sense of importance. An attentive student or researcher would be able to explore - extensively - how different gendered subject positions prompt and are prompted by gendered socialisation and experiences, and how they foster a masculinised sense of importance, or a feminised sense of humility, modesty and altruism. In one of the incidents illustrating this experience, we learn that Fester never gave in to her brutal tormenters on Robben Island, although many other male (and female) prisoners did.

A further remarkable way in which Fester lays bare a gendered perspective in her book is her use of the "I" personal pronoun as well as her own name and surname to signal that her message concerning a collective is more important than her individual identity or personality; social experiences are what matter rather than those distinctively connected to the individual, who is usually named and affirmed, according to post-enlightenment patriarchal convention, by the use of the upper case. In ways reminiscent of bell hooks, Fester writes the personal pronoun, "i" and her name, "gertrude fester" in lowercase. The politics of this choice is explicit in her account of the growth of the organisation, the United Women's Organisation/Congress (UWO/UWCO), in Chapter 2, where she

provides frequent quotations and reminiscences from women involved in that organisation since 1981.

As significant as the book's response to the erasure of women in African prison writing is its defiance of a logocentric narrative structure and conventions, especially in its tentacle-like (some would use the term, "rambling"?) structure, its multi-genre-forms, its often abrupt shifts in tone from deep mourning and loss to child-like zealous joy, and the writing style. As I delved deeper into *Prison Notebook*, I became increasingly conscious of the book's unexpected shifts in subject matter, its unsettling digression into poetic registers, its avoidance of a linear structure, and for readers who pay close attention, the often illogical progression of time.

As the charge against us was treason, it was incumbent on the state to be able to link each of us... Ashley and Yasmina applied to get married while on trial – and it was then that I appointed myself 'mother of the bride'... This was written for Ashley and Yasmina.

As surely as the sun shall rise

You, Ashley and Yasmina, shall be together

Even though dark thunderous clouds prevail

Storms of oppression pelt perilously against us...

Our love and dedication shall rise above

Their barbarism, their barracks, and their bars (165-7).

Part of the women-centred focus, then, is the avoidance of linear "coherence" (there are sudden forays into poetry or musical lyrics, for example) or a sustained storytelling thread (timelines do not always make logical sense, although the idiosyncratic timelines may have personal or psychological meaning to the author, and events are often not coherently connected). In fact, Fester states in her introduction that her description of the trial in chapter 7 is "punctuated with many blurred and confused sections. Consequently it is not the trial experience but rather what I remember and interpret" (p 9). Generally, the plunge into different artistic forms (poetry and drawing) is especially fascinating in revealing writerly struggles to convey complex gendered and psychic experiences.

The author's exploration of imprisonment in gendered ways extends to foregrounding how the prisoner's experiences of incarceration, humiliation and authoritarian bullying become very distinctive when one takes gendered subjectivities into account. Commentators such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) have drawn attention to how arrest, torture, interrogation and imprisonment are linked to sexualised and eroticised encounters and behaviour. But it is significant how the represented perspectives of *women* in prison can make this abundantly clear. Fester was of course looked after by women wardens, but these were situated within a masculinist hierarchy of brutal militaristic authoritarianism. Within this hierarchy, black women prisoners in a white patriarchal system acquired distinctive gendered and sexualised statuses and roles, and they were othered as objects of torture and torment in distinctive ways. As Angela Davis reminds us in her reflections on her North American prison experiences, the trauma of imprisonment and the experiences of both those in prison and those who imprison them is an extreme relationship of eroticised/sexualised racial violence. The prisoner is helpless, alone, and tormented while incarcerated (literally and metaphorically *not* being able to escape the gaze and control of the imprisoner), being locked into a pornographic encounter with the jailer.

Because the book is so compelling in its exploration of socio-political detail, it is likely to prove of significant interest to students and scholars of South African history. Its novel style and structure would also make it a fascinating text for literary scholars and students. Moreover, its frank and direct testimony about different people, places and moments (including the description of the author's approach to her imprisonment on Robben Island, her jailer, and his absolute inability to comprehend "guilt" or "remorse"), stands out as a history of imprisonment. I am struck, for example, by the difference between this book and the very rationalist and depersonalised testimony of a South African woman's prison experience written by another famous South African woman activist, Ruth First in *117 Days*.

It may be tempting to read Fester's book primarily from a scholarly point of view and as a fascinating biographical text. But it is also an extremely poignant window into the courage and tremendous trauma associated with resisting injustices such as apartheid. There are numerous recounted moments that hint

at this trauma, but an especially memorable one for me is described in Chapter 10, titled “Reflections”:

“During my detention in solitary confinement, I no longer menstruated, /My doctor, post prison, examined me and diagnosed early menopause brought on by the trauma. I tried to suppress this memory as well as other very negative ones.” (p 227)

Fester goes on to explain how, when a friend of hers at 49 informed the writer of her pregnancy, Fester enquired from family and friends about when they had been able to bear children, and realised with renewed pain in her late forties how she – in her early thirties – had been denied the decision whether “I wanted to have a child or not” (p 227).

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***Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution*, by Rusha Latif. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022; pp. 337.**

Hala Kamal

Rusha Latif's *Tahrir's Youth: Leaders of a Leaderless Revolution* (2022) joins the body of published books that contribute to a historiography of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. The book opens with an "Introduction" which frames the whole project by addressing leadership in social movements and the agency of young people in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Then follow seven chapters, each divided into connected sections with the last chapter serving as a conclusion. The central argument of the book is that the January 2011 Revolution that mobilised millions of Egyptians to take to the streets was not an uprising triggered by a single major event, but a result of years of organising and protests that escalated within the Egyptian opposition and culminated in the emergence of various movements. The book describes and discusses the role of Egyptian youth through years of political struggle and activism – from the turn of the twenty-first century to the Tahrir Square protests of January 2011 and beyond. Also included in the book are an informative appendix, elaborate notes and bibliography, and a detailed index, in addition to maps and images inserted throughout the text; a total of almost a hundred pages of additional material for readers to explore.

The "Introduction" opens with a description of the author's experience in Tahrir, which provides detailed first-hand eye-witness mapping of the location, slogans, chants, and the "Rules of the Square" (2), thus situating the author, Rusha Latif, as a reliable participant-observer in the research project. The narrative then shifts to the main argument on which Latif bases her research: the power of the Egyptian youth, rather than the widely propagated role of social media, in triggering and sustaining the revolution (4). The main focus of the study is on the leaders of the Revolutionary Youth Coalition (RYC), "the first revolutionary entity to announce itself from Tahrir Square during the

early eighteen-day uprising” that “functioned as one of its main nerve centers” (4), and whose members had been active political activists for years from a variety of ideological backgrounds. The author then explains her methodological approach, placing it within social movement theory and history. She also provides definitions of youth leadership and activist agency, taking into consideration the intersections of ideology, class, and gender. Chapter One, “Encountering Revolution: Expectations and Reality”, situates the author vis-à-vis the research, highlighting her connection to Egypt in personal and cultural terms and her decision, as a second-generation Egyptian American young woman, to turn her personal interest in the daily developments of the Egyptian uprising into a doctoral research project using methods of ethnographic data collection. It is in this chapter that the author describes her multifaceted positionality in Tahrir as “Middle-class, American, female, and veiled” (22), pointing out her consciousness of her complex feelings of belonging yet alienation, which she describes in terms of “subjective duality” (23), specifically as it emerged during her fieldwork experience. In the last section of the chapter, the author briefly describes the backgrounds of the twenty-five activists (members of the RYC), while focusing her analysis on interviews with ten of them.

Chapter Two, “The Contract Collapses”, seeks to delve into the history of Egypt in order to contextualise the 2011 Revolution. The author therefore goes back to what she considers the root of the general discontent since the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, with its unfulfilled promises of the “tacit social contract” (43) between the Egyptian people and the military regime. The chapter is divided into several sections, and begins by situating the January 2011 Revolution within a history of the three successive presidents of the Egyptian Republic from the mid-1950s until January 2011: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak. The chapter highlights the consequences of the military defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, together with the failure to provide “the promise of economic prosperity” (44) despite the victory in the October War in 1973 and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979. This in turn led, over the decades, to the gradual and total subjugation of the Egyptian economy to the requirements of USAID programmes and IMF directives. These politico-economic policies triggered protests and mass mobilisations, such as the Bread Riots of the 1970s, the popular committees supporting the Palestinian Intifada since the 1990s, and the anti-war protests following the

American invasion of Iraq. It was this gradual organising - which intensified at the turn of the century - together with the approaching presidential elections, that created “a game-changing moment that emerged in 2004 and set a new precedent for collective action and political dissent” (52), leading to the creation of the Kefaya (Enough) movement that brought together communists, socialists, liberals, Nasserists, Islamists, and independents. This, in turn, inspired the active engagement of Egyptian youth, such as the April 6 Movement, the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, the ElBaradei Campaign for Presidency, the National Association for Change, and the Khaled Said Campaign, which all came together in the call for mass action on 25 January 2011.

Chapter Three, “Rethinking Spontaneity: Youth Political Agency Before the Uprising”, challenges the general claims that attribute the uprising to “spontaneity” and the role of social media, consigning such claims to “a-historicity” (63). The chapter uses ethnographic research methods to provide a counter-argument through a close study of the personal narratives of nine young men and one woman who were members of the RYC formed in January 2011 in Tahrir. The chapter presents the profiles of these members with a particular interest in “class dimensions, religious affiliation, and political histories” (64). The interviews reveal several important dimensions related to the ideological backgrounds of these activists, including the roles of their politically involved families and their growing up in underprivileged neighbourhoods, which contributed to raising their political awareness. Through the interviews, the chapter also discusses the role of the university and political parties as spaces for political awareness, engagement, and activism pre-January 2011. The chapter ends by dismantling the “myth of Western influence” (106), stressing the young activists’ dismissal of the Western protest movements’ influence on their own revolutionary activism in Egypt. The author concludes her analysis by stressing that the Tahrir youth were deeply rooted in Egyptian history and reality, and stating that their personal and collective “embeddedness in the country’s political and socio-economic trajectory” shaped their “revolutionary subjectivities” (108).

Chapter Four, “Youth Activists and Revolutionary Praxis”, covers the period known as the first eighteen days in Tahrir (25 January -11 February), that is, from the first day of demonstrations until Mubarak’s stepping down from power. The author traces the notion of leadership among the young members of

the RYC as they find themselves at the fore of the Revolution, negotiating their own leadership positions. They do so as they confront the central questions: “What is happening?” and “How should we act?” (109), while contemplating how to steer the unexpected massive participation of the people in the demonstrations as well as build up the revolutionary momentum and push it forward. The chapter examines the revolutionary praxis itself, starting before 25 January. The interviewees explain the details involved in bringing together ideologically different groups, developing the slogans, agreeing on the demands, and setting up mobilisation tactics, among many other preparatory aspects. The second part of the chapter addresses the management of the uprising on 25 January, an analysis of which leads the author to the conclusion that the eighteen-day occupation of Tahrir “was neither a spontaneous popular uprising, nor a carefully planned revolution” (151). In Chapter Five, “Participation, Subjectivity, and Imagination”, the author continues tracing the subjectivities of the RYC leaders with the purpose of identifying the transformations on the personal and political levels. To situate the youth mainly within their organisations, the chapter starts with a brief overview of the following: the April 6 Movement, the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, the ElBaradei Campaign, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The analysis then centres around specific aspects of subjectivity: self, gender, class, religion, and politics, as well as an exploration of the young people’s visions for democracy and a modern Egypt, while conveying their awareness of the history of British colonialism together with contemporary Western neoliberalism and US imperialism. The interviews themselves reveal a general concern among these young people with change, and their roles as agents of change – nationally, regionally, and globally.

Having provided an ethnographic analysis of the RYC leaders’ narratives about themselves and their political involvement in the January uprising, the author focuses in Chapter Six, “The Making and Unmaking of Revolutionary Youth Leadership”, on the manifestations of youth leadership in the Tahrir context. The chapter clearly articulates some of the main findings of the study about leadership, agency, gender, class, religion and ideology, which can be summarised in the following points. First, the 25 January 2011 uprising was not an act of spontaneous protest, nor was it leaderless; it was the outcome of over a decade of activism towards political change; in the author’s words, “it

was not leaderless, spontaneous, or rooted in social media” (187). Rather, it was the product of over a decade of political activism, intensified in the movements and campaigns created in the years leading to January 2011, during which many young people, including the RYC leaders, played founding and leadership roles. Second, there is a clear gender gap in the representation of women in leadership positions, as the author’s fieldwork research revealed that “although men and women were equally engaged in organizing the movement, their leadership roles were gendered” (190). This gap is further intensified by class and ideology, as the interviews showed how specifically the Muslim Brotherhood and Sisterhood consciously refrained from placing women in leadership positions but kept them “behind the scenes” as “silent partners” (192). Third, the author states that the Western media representation of the leaders of the uprising as middle and upper-middle-class, Western-educated, cosmopolitan, technologically savvy young men and women is a false image. She shows how “this image belied reality” since the majority of the youth interlocutors defined themselves as belonging to the struggling “popular class” (194). Lastly, the author admits that her hypothesis about religiosity and leadership was wrong, and it became clear to her that leadership was related to “political ideology” rather than “personal religious practice” (198).

The final chapter, “The Revolution Continues?,” moves beyond the January uprising, and questions what has happened to the Revolution that followed. Writing a few years after the January 2011 Revolution, the author finds that “the mood is one of defeat and resignation”, while the counterrevolution prevails and “critical voices are demonized and excluded” (216). Reviewing the events of the years that followed, which witnessed the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise and fall, followed by the military rise to power, the author emphasises the importance of acknowledging the young leaders’ revolutionary achievements despite “the activists’ failings, strategic errors, and missed opportunities” (257). Among the greatest achievements with which the author concludes her book is that January 2011 is a revolution in the way it “politicized and transformed legions of apathetic young people” (258). She ends her book with the assertion that “the revolution continues” (260).

All in all, unlike the scores of works of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, and articles about the Tahrir as experience, location, phenomenon, and icon, this

book is a work of scholarship grounded in socio-political reality that combines personal experience with historical and ethnographic research. Published eleven years after the events, it allows the reader space for a retrospective reflection and a critical reading of the period and its consequences. For the global and Western reader, it provides a narrative of the 'Egyptian Arab Spring' that argues against most of the Western discourses about the spontaneous leaderless revolution of cosmopolitan Western-educated youth. Through the interviews and participant observation, the author provides a reliable alternative narrative that sheds light on the reality. On the other hand, for those of us who experienced the Revolution, and continue to live under its consequences, the book provides profiles of people we know and events we witnessed, and as such offers a documentation of our own history and experience. Finally, for academics around the world, this book is the product of a serious and rigorous research process that provides another solid addition to the scholarship on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, as well as on Social Movements theory and praxis. It does not provide a final narrative, but it opens up areas for further interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences – addressing more elaborately, for example, issues such as gender and the location of the January 2011 Revolution in the history of the Egyptian feminist movement.

Contributors

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H.E. Abena P. A. Busia is a Ghanaian diplomat, an internationally renowned poet, and a Professor Emerita. Currently her country's Ambassador to Brazil and eleven other South American countries, she served forty years in the Departments of English and Women's & Gender Studies and Comparative Literature at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She has received Fellowships and awards from numerous organizations including the Rockefeller, Fulbright and Ford Foundations, and the Rutgers University President's Award

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