

Editorial

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

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Introduction

This issue focuses on pan-African feminist popular education in Global Africa as a liberatory force for women. Our intention is to contribute to the documentation of both historical and contemporary practices of pan-African feminist popular education. The issue is inspired by long-standing, often undocumented, practices of popular education in Pan-African and Feminist movements. The contributions in this issue actively engage African women on questions of power, patriarchy, pan-Africanism, class consciousness, and women's rights and dignity in Africa. They contribute to our collective archiving efforts that document historical and ongoing experiments with pan-African feminist popular education. By focusing on contemporary practices while tracing historical genealogies, the work presented in this issue reveals the often invisible intellectual and political work of African women who have been active in popular education. The issue, therefore, underscores the importance of feminist approaches to popular education and women's conscientisation. It demonstrates that popular education is crucial in addressing our society's multiple crises and challenges. The development of a critical and active citizenry is essential for challenging those in power who continue to implement harmful and anti-women, anti-poor policies.

Popular education in Global Africa has been tied to the pan-African and African feminist movements. At the pan-African level, this education emphasises the unification and liberation of Africa and African people including women (Tsikata 2014). For feminists, it foregrounds and seeks to undo women's oppression and marginalisation and reflects on gender equity. It, therefore, stresses the need to build a different and just world where women, and African women in particular, are not on the margins, but also occupy the centre.

Popular education can take many forms, including political education, workshop interventions, popular newspapers or internet news sites, artistic expressions, and non-hierarchical informal discussions that galvanise people to act to change their circumstances. Popular education links and troubles the porous boundaries between people's realities and structural factors that influence those realities, and also between activism and theory. For feminists, it bridges multiple scales, starting from the scale of the body to the macro scale as a way of making sense of oppression and domination. In popular education, learning is informed by and responsive to these experiences of oppression, with the ultimate goal of building people's power and alternatives that foster liberation. Whether dialogical or cyclical, popular education invites people to take control of their own learning for social and political transformation. In other words, popular education, at its very core, is liberatory and transformative and encourages the 'student' to become a change agent in their community (local, national, or global). Paulo Freire (2000), in his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, contends that education, if used for its intended purpose, transforms the student and teacher into agents of transformation. Popular education, at its root, seeks to transform the worldview of those engaging in it. To that end, it is a liberatory intellectual and political project that "awakens" people to their collective capacity, ignites "radical conversations", supports resistance to injustices, and inspires a re-imagining of alternatives (Freire 2000; Mama 2017). Popular education, therefore, serves to demystify the workings of power while fostering consciousness that drives collective social change and concrete political action. These educational approaches, which represent both acts of resistance and efforts to construct new learning paradigms, are fundamental to global emancipatory pan-African and feminist movements, as the authors in this issue demonstrate. The contributions presented here illustrate that learning, activism, and organising function as integrated components of popular education rather than separate elements.

This *Feminist Africa* (FA) issue on pan-African feminist popular education diverges from mainstream debates on knowledge production, teaching, and learning in that it focuses on knowledge production and learning in informal institutions and not 'traditional' classrooms. It centres popular education and knowledge production by activists and in communities, organisations, and in the hands of individuals leading popular education campaigns. Feminist popular

education has a long history within the feminist and pan-African movement as one way in which learning outside the classrooms occurs (Walters and Manicom 1996; Tsikata 2001; Chigudu 2002; Manicom and Walters 2012; Endresen 2013). The authors in this issue examine popular education as it unfolds at grassroots spaces, where learning catalyses a critical perception of the world. This catalytic learning occurs through multiple approaches as our featured works demonstrate: by centring people's experiences and connecting them to broader, normalised oppressive structures; by engaging in a critique of prevalent, internalised negative messages that circulate widely in society; and by elevating previously repressed knowledges that can illuminate alternative ways of being (Grossman 2009).

This issue builds on earlier issues of *Feminist Africa* such as FA 19 (2014) on Pan-Africanism and Feminism, and FA 20 (2015) on Feminism and Pan-Africanism. The former issue considers pan-African legacies and the often erased contributions of women to the movement leading up to the African independence era, and the latter interrogates the contributions of feminists to the pan-African movement, particularly in the post-independence era of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism. The articles in this issue, therefore, further develop similar liberatory themes and foreground unconventional pedagogical sensibilities. The contributions, then, add to this legacy by inserting and making visible the often-neglected African women's popular education efforts. The issue, which consists of four features, three in-conversations, and two book reviews, intervenes at two key levels: it adds to the collective archiving efforts of feminist popular education and insists that these efforts be afforded their political significance as initiatives that cultivate emancipatory possibilities. It attends to the invisibility of African women's political contributions in popular education which conscientised and mobilised communities and women.

In all feature articles, popular education is conceived as a vehicle for women's liberation. The papers in this issue collectively explore liberatory pan-African feminist visions that foster solidarities, while also examining contemporary feminist organising that extends beyond physical spaces into virtual realms. Some articles in this issue (see Rocha et al.; Knowles; Mensah and Ntšekhe) reflect on the collaborative and horizontal processes of curriculum development within pan-African feminist popular education. The political impact of these initiatives varies in scale and scope. While some focus on micro-level changes

and individual transformation (see Benya et al. in this issue), others pursue both micro and macro interventions (see Frehiwot and Issah; Boikanyo in this issue), working simultaneously toward personal and broader social transformation (see Tukur in this issue). The papers in this issue demonstrate a diverse representation of pan-African feminist popular education in motion. The next sections of this editorial will highlight three key themes that emerge in the works, namely: Popular Education as a Political Project; Digital Activism and Popular Education; and Popular Education as Resistance.

Popular Education as a Political Project

Popular Education in this issue is conceived intrinsically as a political project that seeks to disrupt the imperialist nature of the capitalist world. We interpret the use of pan-African feminist popular education as a political act through the works in this issue. Popular education, at its core, is an act of resistance against oppression and repression and is aimed at empowering the people (whomever they are at a particular intersection) to embrace their power. The issue is anchored on Benya and Frehiwot's paper entitled "Towards a Living Archive of Pan-African Feminist Popular Education". The work contributes to literature that places women at the centre of liberation struggles and popular education in Africa. The authors engage with debates surrounding the origins of popular education, establishing its presence on the continent prior to Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. They address critical perspectives, particularly feminist critiques, regarding both the conceptualisation and practice of popular education. The analysis reveals what scholars identify as persistent, unresolved questions that continue to challenge popular education's framework and implementation. Through a historical mapping of feminist popular education in Africa, the article identifies the gaps and blind spots in traditional popular education and makes interventions in feminist popular education and a case for pan-African feminist popular education. Much like the anchoring feature, Benya's book review of *Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South* argues that the Global South contributes to debates on popular education, knowledge production, decolonial critical research approaches, and much more. The review critiques the lack of African scholars represented in the book but

acknowledges that knowledge production is racialised and gendered and that Southern sociology should dismantle these hierarchies.

Research has linked popular education to national politics across the continent, particularly during the liberation era. Lockett, Walters and von Kotze (2017) contend that South African popular education is both interwoven with political struggles and linked with the nation's socio-political reality. Political struggles for independence were often the site of liberatory education during the 1950s and 1960s. Mubarak Tukur's article on the "Northern Element Progressive Union's (NEPU) women's wing" draws linkages between national politics and popular education during the independence era. The article amplifies the contributions of NEPU's women's wing to national liberation and women's emancipation in Northern Nigeria. The paper features Sawaba Gambo, the leader of the women's wing, who was instrumental in Nigeria's independence struggle as central to the organisation's success. It shows how the wing used popular education to concretise the political ideas of women in the region and encourage their political involvement in NEPU. Tukur's article underscores the long tradition of women's contribution to nationalism in Northern Nigeria, particularly through NEPU (Nwosu 1983; Umar 1993; Iliyasu 2016; Yahaya and Adam 2022), using popular education as a transformative tool. Most post-independence African nations regarded higher education as a site of resistance and a contributor to national development (Assié-Lumumba 2011). This is important as we dissect the sites of popular education in politics in Africa. Much of the liberatory education that occurred immediately post-independence was embedded in University Institutes such as the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana (Adjei et al. 2024) and the Dar es Salaam School of African History at the University of Dar es Salaam (Campbell 1991; Bgoya 2022). Popular education manifests differently based on location, the historical and political relationship to the colonial apparatus, and the form of political resistance against colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism.

The politics of liberation from colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism are intertwined with patriarchy resulting in the history of these movements being inherently male dominated. Since popular education in Africa is tied to liberation movements, the erasure of women in these movements impacts the

effectiveness of and potential for a categorical leap forward. Sesanti (2016) acknowledges that there has not been a full and true liberation of African women in historical or contemporary struggles. Despite the contributions of women to key pan-African events, such as the Pan-African congresses (Roy-Cambell 1996; Davies 2014), and scores of liberation movements (Allman et al. 2002; Lyons 2004; Levy 2008; Bouilly et al. 2016), women continue to be erased from the pan-African popular education literature and practice.

Digital Activism and Popular Education

Digital activism and popular education are an important component of pan-African feminist movement work in the 21st century. Movements such as #ArabSpring, #FreeMustFall, #BlacklivesMatters, and #EndGalamsey have used popular education through social media to raise awareness in the local and global community. The use of social media has elevated these seemingly local struggles to global African community movements almost overnight (Newsom and Lengel 2012; Ndlovu 2017; Mazibuko 2020). Most online campaigns that promote pan-African feminist popular education are deeply connected to on-the-ground movements. These movements attempt to transform collective consciousness through online popular education, often connecting their struggles to other movements and demonstrating global solidarity (Brown et al. 2017). “Pan-African Popular Education in Motion: A Conversation with *Towards Feminist Consciousness Collective*” – a conversation between Mjiba Frehiwot and Ramatu Issah, and Mena Souilem and Mai Panaga – demonstrates the intersection between popular education and digital activism. The conversation emphasises how the collective engages digital platforms to introduce pan-African feminist ideas and principles to Arabic-speaking people in Africa through easily digestible digital popular education. The collective is a cutting-edge group of pan-African feminists expanding the binary accounts of the pan-African and feminist movements. The conversation is a political art piece that begins with the birth of the collective in Western Sahara. The current occupation of the Western Sahara makes the founding of the collective more dynamic and noteworthy. The project is rooted in resistance to patriarchy, raises critical consciousness in the Arabic-speaking world, and is steeped in class consciousness.

Social media activism in Africa sprang to the forefront of political consciousness during the #ArabSpring that began in Tunisia in 2010. Gheythanchi and Moghadam (2014) argue that women are central to these movements, even though they have not always directly benefitted. However, women continue to lead and participate in these movements through collective engagement with liberatory tools such as popular education (Gheythanchi and Moghadam 2014). Ngidi et al. (2016) contend that social media activism can transform movements from local to global movements. This would include the use of popular education, albeit in a one-directional way, about a particular issue or political challenge such as the current war on Palestine. It is difficult to determine if social media activism and online popular education transform political consciousness. However, as Ngidi et al. (2016) argue, as society changes, the mode of social activism must transform. We assert that popular education can no longer be conceived of as a classroom activity but one that transcends the classroom to society through activism, particularly online.

The online space is also being used as a site of resistance by scores of pan-African feminists who are engaging in feminist reading groups. Knowles, Mensah, and Ntšekhe's article entitled "Theory in Action: A Pan-Africanist Online African Feminist Reading Group" explores the use of online reading groups to deconstruct colonial ideas and construct liberated and African facing ideals. This piece, much like Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani (2022), links the authors' reading group to the long tradition of African feminist popular education work, particularly the writing group *Sisterhood* which was operational in the 1970s. The authors advance the use of popular education for liberation in the virtual space that translates to the non-virtual world. This trans-locational group represents an epistemic community that embraces a decolonial praxis.

Feminist reading groups have played a significant role in the formation of feminist consciousness and as a form of resistance against patriarchy and imperialism. Gardiner et al. (2022) interrogate reading groups as a method to challenge and disrupt societal issues. Readings groups are, by the very nature of their makeup, transversal and trans-bodied. Forrest, McCullagh and Reilly (2024) contend that reading groups can serve as points of decolonisation and contribute to both individual and collective resistance against the imperial core. The collective resistance in reading groups, particularly those in the virtual space,

is linked to building new epistemologies and producing liberatory knowledge. Epistemic African feminist reading groups have become more popular across Global Africa. Khan et al. (2022) argue that their *Black Feminist Killjoy* reading group serves as a safe space for women and contributes to building solidarity, resistance, and liberatory practices for its members. These contributions, therefore, demonstrate how virtual spaces can be transformed into sites of genuine connection and political mobilisation and how they can nurture meaningful feminist community building.

Popular Education as Resistance

Resistance is a central theme in popular education groups, spaces (online and in person), and literature. The very act of forming a popular education collective is radical and a form of resistance against the impact of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. Resistance is a pedagogical stance in popular education, one that foregrounds the work covertly and overtly of most popular education communities. Resistance is also tied to epistemological characteristics (Abdi 2022) that emerge in the act of popular education. Rocha et al.'s feature entitled "Cultivating Seeds of Transformation: Reflections of Young Facilitators on Feminist Popular Education from Mozambique" illustrates the act of radical epistemological resistance through engaging young people around the complex history of feminist movements in Mozambique and the Pan-African Feminist Movement. The authors demonstrate how MUVA's pan-African feminist popular education approach goes beyond mere reflection on harmful gendered practices and norms. The project is rooted in liberatory and emancipatory ideas that engage young women as agents in their own stories. The article provides an in-depth exploration of MUVA's pedagogical tools, highlighting their collaborative curriculum development process and the centrality of dialogue between learners and facilitators. The authors link their work to the work of Paulo Freire in Guinea Bissau when he and colleagues contributed to literacy campaigns in the 1970s (Freire 1978; Frehiwot 2022).

Resistance manifests differently based on the community, history of struggle, and the main actors challenging a particular issue. Women's resistance and participation have often occurred through service to humanity and not

necessarily through direct confrontation with the colonial, neo-colonial, and neo-liberal apparatus. However, the service to community and humanity that African women engage in is often liberatory, forward-looking, and practical. “Pan-African Feminist Popular Education in Global Africa: Resisting and Building Locally and Globally through Liberatory Transformative Education”, a conversation between Asanda-Jonas Benya and Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo of South West and North West Women’s Task Force (SNWOT), supports the theory that women contribute to societal transformation through service. The conversation uncovers how SNWOT uses popular education and public demonstrations to advocate for peace and to initiate dialogue. The strategy that SNWOT uses to transform society is utilised across the continent by individuals, collectives, and organisations who demonstrate that liberation and transformation can be closely integrated with community service. The conversation makes one pause to reconsider the contributions of women throughout the history of the pan-African and popular education movements. This is also demonstrated in “Reconnecting Experiences to Politics: *Purposeful* in Conversation”, in which Boikanyo Modungwa speaks with Dr Ramatu Bangura and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli. The work features an African-rooted feminist hub for girls’ activism and organising. The intimate conversation between two Feminists who have been at the forefront of pan-African popular education is exciting, introspective, and forward-looking. *Purposeful* as an organisation is producing and using radical popular education by hosting Feminist Night Schools and Radical Reading virtual groups. Lastly, the piece raises critical questions about the need to challenge one’s colonial mentality through disruption and resistance to what is familiar and how to incorporate African ways of knowing in pan-African feminist popular education.

Resistance in Africa comes in many forms. One of the most powerful forms of resistance is the use of one’s body as a weapon. Faniyi’s book review of *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* by Naminata Diabete (2020) explores how women have radically used nakedness as a weapon of protest. The piece argues that women’s protest movements manipulate socially constructed norms as their weapons to fight for a more just society. These contributions demonstrate that women both go unnoticed for and force society through the most taboo manner to acknowledge their role in African liberation, transformation, and development.

Conclusion

In reclaiming the narratives of pan-African feminist popular education, we illuminate how African women have long been architects of transformative educational practices, challenging oppressive systems through innovative, locally rooted pedagogical strategies. The pieces in this issue demonstrate that pan-African feminist popular education is not a marginal practice, but a critical site of political consciousness, community and nation-building, and emancipatory politics. By documenting these often-overlooked initiatives, we challenge dominant narratives that have systematically erased African women's contributions within this pan-African strand of popular education. Our collective archiving efforts contribute to the epistemic justice work that African feminists have been undertaking. This archiving is not only an academic exercise but a political one too. It is another method of resistance, which testifies to African women's collective imagination and political engagement. As we move forward, these contributions call for continued critical scholarship that centres African women's experiences, amplifies their voices, and recognises their pivotal role in shaping liberatory educational practices across the continent and beyond through time. Blind-spots in the history of pan-Africanism, feminism, and popular education in Africa isolate and divide these movements and their potential for Africa. Examining these practices together is crucial for understanding liberation struggles in Africa and the African diaspora. This collection of work contributes to the legacy of resistance, knowledge production, and collective liberation in Africa.

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