

# Feminist Reflections

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## A FEMINIST CONVERSATION: SITUATING OUR RADICAL IDEAS AND ENERGIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CONTEXT



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This essay is the outcome of a conversation between two radical African feminists, Patricia McFadden and Patricia Twasiima, who unapologetically and with sheer pleasure, think, live and share feminist ideas and imaginaries. Both are part of the *African Feminist Reflection and Action Group*. They live in eastern and southern Africa, respectively, and whilst they are 'separated' by distance and age in very conventional ways, their ideas and passions for freedom and being able to live lives of dignity through their own truths as Black women on their continent, and beyond, are the ties that bind them inseparably as Contemporary African Feminists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The conversation they are engaged with and in ranges over several core challenges and tasks that have faced feminists ever since the emergence of a public radical women's politics of resistance against patriarchy. But it also reflects on new faces of patriarchy and oppression we are confronted with today and on how women's struggles to counter them can be strengthened.



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## *Contextualizing the Conversation*

**W**omen have resisted oppression and exclusion for as long as humans have lived as organized groups. And while feminist articulations tended to be drowned out by the large masculine nationalist anti-colonial, anti-racist voice in all African societies on and beyond the continent, there were very significant Black women who were defining the contours and key elements of what has blossomed into present day African feminism. As Torunoglu argues, 'In Egypt, nationalism fostered feminist solidarities. In turn, Egyptian

women generated a nationalist discourse that legitimized their case. Nationalists and feminists collaborated to pursue their common goal of gaining independence from a colonial power' (2016). Among the most outstanding and increasingly recognized feminist resisters whose struggles and lives intersected with anti-colonial nationalist struggles on and off the continent were Hudda Sharaawi (Egypt), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Nigeria), Lilian Ngoyi (South Africa) and Wambui Otieno (Kenya). These women stood out, publicly, and anti-patriarchal and uncompromisingly anti-colonial (Jayawardena, 1986; Davies, 2000).

Feminism is compellingly a celebration of the amazing power, beauty, knowledge, courage and farsightedness of women who say 'No', unequivocally and unambiguously, to any and all forms of oppression, repression and exclusion. As Barbara Smith puts it, "feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women" (1980). It is the interfacing – conceptually and existentially – of resistance and celebration, which gives feminism, particularly contemporary African feminism, its unique quality of Contemporarity. This is the political and subjective character of an ideology and identity that calls for and uncompromisingly insists upon the non-negotiability of core notions and values. Values like bodily and sexual integrity, dignity, autonomous existence as a core element of personhood, and the realization of sufficiency in one's lived and philosophical practice. These non-negotiables are transforming and revitalizing feminism as both resistance and as a source of joy and freedom. Love and solidarity have been woven into feminism as a struggle and as an existence since the moment that women recognized the injustice and impunity which anchor patriarchal power and privilege in all human societies. And, women resolved to fight back and reclaim their freedom and dignity.

These are the traditions and subjectivities that keep us grounded, secure in the knowledge that ever since humans took that first step forward towards our futures, on this continent and then across our planet, Freedom – the entitlement to become the most that you are capable of in every sense of one's abilities – is inherent in the very idea and realization of humanness. Therefore, in response to patriarchal injustice which denies women their freedom, through resistance and struggle - we, the women of the African continent and of the world, are crafting a political discourse that centres women's ideas and knowledge in the imaginings of an alternative African reality.

For many decades, radical ideas that were epistemologically located in women's lived realities were shunned and shunted aside in preference of faux versions of a convenient narrative which insisted that because oppression and exploitation have been occurring since the dawn of time, excluded groups, but particularly women, should just grin and bear it. However, justice as truth is built into our every existential instinct as humans. The awareness that everyone who arrives on this planet is born free and endowed with everything they need to be astoundingly creative and beautiful in each of our unique ways. Hence, oppressed communities have refused to submit to class, gendered, heteronormative, ableist and racist hegemony. Women were taught and continue to learn that they can only be the limited, shadowy reflections of the men who rule their homes and societies. But the unlearning has also been happening side-by-side with the theoretical and activist work of feminists, creating discourse sites to contest these ideas while reminding ourselves that we are enough in and of ourselves to fully celebrate our humanness.



## The feminist struggle for alternative societies

In this regard, feminists who are located on different fronts of the struggle to re-imagine and build alternative societies, societies that are crafted outside the market have been challenging the supposed unavoidability of capitalism and its varied extractivist forms – from commodity agriculture to the dire consequences of mining and industries that accompany this plunder. They are calling for a different relationship with Nature – in agriculture and the production of pollutant-free food, in the conservation and preservation of natural habitats and ecosystems and in the shift to non-carbon-based forms of energy from community to international levels. They are also urgently calling for a return of land to communities through genuine and transparent conversations and decision-making processes, especially with women, in communities that have been living on mineral-rich land whose exploitation has not benefited them, but instead has become a scourge in their lives.

The WoMin network (African Women Unite against Destructive Resource Extraction) and its alliance members is one such example. They undertake critical research studies on the impacts of mining, oil extraction and steel production in seven African countries. They argue that one of the study's principle findings is that the impact of extractive industries on land, water, and food systems – the communal wealth from which women create livelihoods for families and communities – are so grave that in the long term, the costs of mineral- and oil-based development tend to outweigh the benefits.

This critique of extractivism, in its more conventional sense, is also translating into more critical eco-feminist ideas and conversations, particularly within South Africa. An interesting example of this is the Feminist Table, formed in 2012, which

'uses the Marxist feminist notion of social reproduction, i.e. the unpaid care work which (Black) women do outside the market, both in their households and in their communities'. (Fakier and Cock, 2017)

Another very important genre of alternative feminist discourse on re-imagined alternative ways of human living is reflected in the theoretical work of the group International Feminists for a Gift Economy. Initiated by Genevieve Vaughan whose work plays a crucial role of encouraging feminists (and women generally) to think of their power, nurture legacies in deeply political ways, and to translate the egalitarian core of gifting, which emanates from the ways in which women have lived for millennia. The main message is:

'We are born into a Gift Economy practiced by those who mother us, enabling us to survive. The economy of exchange, *quid pro quo*, separates us from each other and makes us adversarial, while gift giving and receiving creates mutuality and trust'<sup>1</sup>.

The notion of the Gift Economy has influenced the thinking and practice of the idea of *Sufficiency*. It can bring our lifestyles closer to a different and more holistic relationship with Nature and with our bodies, as well as creating the opportunities to explore newer and different kinds of relationships with other women, on a one-on-one basis in this contemporary moment. The maternalism /motherism, which underlies the essentially eco-feminist discourse, is problematic. Nonetheless, living in a feudal dictatorship where any kind of critique of the *status quo* spells certain incarceration, we can draw from some of the essentialism of the Gift Economy discourse, efforts to perform feminist work innovatively and more inter-personally (as an application of the notion of Feminist Contemporarity).

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<sup>1</sup> See this and other excerpts of Genevieve Vaughan's work on <http://gift-economy.com/>

In the contemporary context, when competing claims and persistent nationalist ideological backlashes have brought feminism into the limelight in new, interesting and challenging ways (#MeToo, #MenAreTrash, #TotalShutDown), feminism must retrieve its essential truths and apply them in our respective contexts and times. It must guide women to recognize the person in themselves, then share generationally across all the divides which the Patriarchy has invented and institutionalized the knowledge that it is only by being free that can women realize and enjoy the full worth of their being. And, by doing so, each contributes to the multiple efforts of other humans who seek to live freely. It is with this backdrop of the existential unavoidability of justice and freedom that female bodies and lives have become the counterpoint to injustice, violation, impunity and exclusions, which characterizes all our societies in the current moment.



## *Manifestations of Patriarchy today*

To confront Patriarchy, one must be able to analyse it: its working, its ability to co-opt feminist language and its different manifestations. It is necessary to understand the system, which keeps womyn<sup>2</sup> dominated and subordinate, and to unravel its workings in order to work for womyn's freedoms in a systemic way. Walby defines patriarchy 'as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (1990, p. 20). Patriarchy is therefore the institutionalised and systemic dominance of men at the expense of women and everyone who is not identified as masculine.

<sup>2</sup> "Womyn" is one of the many alternative spellings used by some feminists as a political statement and a repudiation of traditions that have defined "women" in reference to a male norm.

The containment of feminist demands and the depoliticization of feminism is one of the newer manifestations of Patriarchy today. Almost everywhere we turn, there is a pop culture song claiming feminism. Expensively priced t-shirts, world political leaders and TV shows argue that 'everyone should be feminist'. There is an enormous effort to make feminism more palatable, to reduce it to a one-liner that sounds good or a chorus that fits in a song. The peril of feminism splurging into the mainstream has been its depoliticization that erases the radical politics behind the feminist concept.

It perverts the feminist political movement into something that does not threaten the status quo and is therefore something non-revolutionary and arbitrary. Of course, this is contrary to the foundation of feminism. Feminism is and always will be a threat to the status quo. As the status quo itself is unacceptable, the dismantling of the systems that enable it to exist is what the feminist movement is founded upon. The process of dismantling this system means that several groups of people who are currently benefiting from this system will lose their privilege, their access to power, wealth they've accumulated, access and comfortability. The idea therefore that this process would be a smooth one, a win-win scenario, is yet another way in which Patriarchy works. For example: the arguments that the inclusion of womyn into the economy would benefit the whole economy to grow. The purpose of our movement should not be to assimilate into structures that were never designed to benefit us<sup>3</sup>. The focus should be on reimagining alternatives for these structures.

When we think of our feminism as a radical approach necessary to dismantle systems of oppression, we must in turn be able to see how our cultures, religions, and notions we insist on clinging to so dearly, perpetuate patterns of Patriarchy. Away from the

<sup>3</sup> And by "us" I mean anyone existing outside the identification of "cisgendered heterosexual male."

buzzwords, we must ask, for example, what does it mean to have “feminist icons” that are pro-war, openly racist, or unapologetically capitalist? Who makes these fancy ‘feminist t-shirts’ and under what conditions? We must question. We must search for knowledge and analyse our new realities with these principle-based information. While we don nooses of conformity, refusing to acknowledge these hard truths, the Patriarchy continues to infiltrate, morph, and now even exists in spaces we had carved out as feminist. Contemporary African feminism must be deeply embedded politically and revolutionarily. Anything else is a diversion.



But Patriarchy also continues to mispresent itself as the protection of traditional values and cultures. In many African countries, there is a resurgence of anti-feminist rhetoric, an emergence of the boy-child syndrome (the idea that men are the new oppressed group in society) and the continued falsified notion that feminism is un-African, threatening African values and cultures. Feminism is described as an epidemic which is destroying the fabric of family. Abortions are one of the consequences. This and many other similar rhetoric focuses on amplifying and exaggerating biological differences between men and women, while using religion and culture to legitimize women’s subordination. The insertion of cultural difference as a way to defend the mistreatment of women. It hinges on the idea of traditions being ahistorical, immutable and misogynistic – an insult to any dynamic tradition – and must be at the centre of all feminist efforts geared towards dismantling Patriarchy. Moreover, the re-popularization of specific traditions are becoming very chic among youth, like gender-reveal parties or bridal showers, in which young brides are taught using the very limited understandings of what constitutes womynhood.

This is directly linked to the deliberate branding of the heterosexual family unit as the norm and the use of that to attack feminists and feminist causes. Profiling men as the caretakers and by extension giving them economic, social and otherwise power perpetuates male dominance, which is at the very core of the heterosexual family unit. Within this structure, gender roles are reinforced with men leading and women supporting. This same narrative is justified by the idea of God, and thereby innate. “It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper suited for him.”, as said in Genesis 2:18. Therefore, the dynamics of heterosexual relations are imbalanced and largely skewed against women lenses. The insistence of compulsory heteronormativity and its influence on relations beyond husband and wife must be explored.

One of the greatest tools at the Patriarchy’s disposal is the use of the law as an avenue to morally police and strip women of true agency. Integrated with deep religious tendencies, many African states continue to use the law to excuse their policing of women’s bodies, attacking sexual reproductive rights and normalization of violence against women. In 2014, the Ugandan minister of state for Youth Affairs, Ronald Kibuule, stated publicly that ‘women who dress indecently deserve to be raped’<sup>4</sup>. He requested that police cross-check the backgrounds of rape cases to eliminate those ‘provoked’ by women dressed in miniskirts, bikinis and tight jeans. Uganda also legalised an Anti-Homosexuality Act –although it was later annulled on a technicality – and the Anti-Pornography Act, whose definition of “pornography” includes vague references to ‘indecent show’ and ‘representation of the sexual parts of a person for primarily sexual excitement’<sup>5</sup> Ethics and Integrity Minister Simon Lokodo recently

4 Daily Monitor September 2013. Can be accessed via <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/EXCLUSIVE--Minister-Kibuule-audio-recording/688334-2007616-tc9lv1z/index.html>

5 BBC News Africa 01 Aug 2014. Can be accessed via <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-28613925/cheers-as-uganda-court-annuls-anti-homosexuality-law>

announced that the Act prohibits certain forms of womyn's dress, such as miniskirts. Uganda is just one example of how the law has been co-opted to serve the interests of religious fundamentalists, among others whose interest is to police womyn's bodies, among others. <sup>6</sup> In other African countries, like Mozambique, womyn cannot enter public buildings with their shoulders uncovered. While this is not even a law, only some sort of unofficial decree, nobody (except some feminist activists) have questioned it. There are also debates about school uniforms that allege that girls must wear specific types of clothing to not divert the attention of their teachers. This kind of moral policing has wider influence. Not only does it limit womyn's autonomy and agency to decide for themselves what type of clothing they prefer, it normalizes patriarchal standards that are harmful to womyn and affect their quality of life.

## The gender discourse in the context of development

Gender discourse and policies in the neo-liberal development context are another attempt of the Patriarchy to tame feminism and to moderate feminist struggles to dilute the dynamic impact they pose to the existing patriarchal order and its socio-cultural, political, legal and economic systems that are founded on exclusion and injustice. The deliberate 'watering down' of feminism's meaning and the systematic relocation of its key conceptual elements (mainly gender) into liberal epistemologies that push for moderate discourses and policies has become an urgent contemporary challenge that is facing feminists – ideologically and pragmatically.

Conceptually, Feminism is anchored in a lived resistance to Patriarchal oppression and male domination. Resistance against a status quo that is initiated by surplus value creation and the realization that from very early on in human societies that women can be exchanged among males (thus creating the foundations of the heterosexual family) and that an equivalence can be drawn between women and other sentient beings – like cattle and camels, for example. This created the basis of what today is known as 'the market'. The very first market was created by males through the invention of taboos and rituals which enabled them to domesticate women in the heterosexual family and to privatize women's bodies for the purposes of breeding and producing a constant supply of labour. Over time, women learnt to collude with this social reality, generally; thus enabling male hegemony through the acceptance of domination as 'common sense'. Although there were always women who rejected and rebelled against patriarchal hegemony, overall, women became the custodians of male privilege within the domestic arena as the norm, serving as guardians of patriarchal power.



<sup>6</sup> BBC New Africa 26 February 2014. Can be accessed via <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26351087>

As class societies were consolidated in later periods, the labour that women produced became the reservoir from where capital would draw for the expansion of capital and profit for the capitalist class. And while workers as wage earners – who were and still are largely male – have resisted class exploitation and exclusions associated with capitalist contempt for blue-collar workers, they did not extend their experiences of inequality to their relationships with women in the work place and/or in the home.

As the division of labour began to emerge in early societies, women had to be ‘captured’ and owned for men to control their reproductive and creative capacities. Women therefore became the first expression of property, of private property – owned and controlled and circulated by males within male-controlled households. This practice persists into the present day, with most human societies enabling for men to own and control the bodies and capabilities of women as a ‘normal’ practice. Marriage, which represents a contract between men and the state, legitimizes this privatization of women as male property. Women who breed outside the direct control of men in recognized heterosexual structures are vilified through all manner of speech and are generally punished for being ‘indecent and unruly’. The state emerged out of wars over expansion by accumulation other humans, women and children mainly, and domesticated animals through appropriation. Later, class, race, and other social differentiators were invented to consolidate and assure male privilege through discourses and practices of coercion and collusion.

The establishment of male rights over the bodies, sexualities, capacities and abilities of women and the children they bear marks the foundational moment of heteronormativity and the domestication of women as male property. In all societies, women are expected to work altruistically, without expecting remuneration. The systems and

mechanism that measure the value of male labour deliberately exclude and/or obfuscate the value of women’s work. This is one of numerous areas where feminists have clearly shown the direct relationship between exploitation, non-remuneration of women’s labour and male supremacy, particularly in the domestic arena.

But women have resisted this oppression and domination from the very earliest times, bringing their agency to the struggle to regain their integrity and autonomy. These forms of resistance provide the bedrock of what we are recognize as feminism today – the refusal to be relegated to the status of property by another human being. In the same ways that Black people have insisted upon their humanity against White supremacist ideologies and practices of exclusion, so have women been insisting upon the retrieval and re-instatement of their autonomous personhood within their respective societies for much longer.





## Feminism and the Gender concept

Feminism and its resulting resistance are premised on diverse discourses which reflect the complex intersectionalities that have arisen out of women's distinct struggles and the meanings and intentions of feminism as politics that is located in the bodies and lives of females/women. While feminists agree that resistance is central to anti-patriarchal politics, the meanings and implications of feminist politics and the modes of struggle that are adopted and articulated remain deeply contested among feminists everywhere. It must be noted that while all feminists are women, not all women are feminists.

Gender, on the other hand, initially emerges out of women's attempts to craft a heuristic tool that begins to explain the mechanisms that exist in society to manage and control women. It is about the hierarchies of power between women and men in the production of life's goods and services. Roles are pivotal in the maintenance of division of labour, which largely restrict women to the 'private' domain as a 'natural location' for females – defined through notions of femininity and domesticity which socialize girls into submissiveness and conformity and boys into identities of hegemonic masculinity and power. As Stevi Jackson puts it: "Men" and "women" are not biologically given entities but social groups defined by the hierarchies and exploitative relationships between them (1996).

The historical evolution of gender as a specifically 'feminist thinking tool' is directly related to the emergence and internationalization of women's struggles for personhood, dignity, integrity and freedom to be recognized as full citizens in their respective societies. Just as the struggles of workers, who are the main producers of commodities and profit in capitalist societies, gave rise to the notion of class as the core notion in analysing and understanding the relationship between producers and exploiters; so too, women's struggles to retrieve their personhood and integrity as complete and autonomous beings, produced a heuristic tool which explains the infrastructures of exploitation and domination within women's relationships with men and the power systems and institutions in every society.

Therefore, the notion of gender as a relational tool, describes and explicates the systems and practices through which women are socially and culturally constructed as subordinate to males: how women are expected to perform particular functions and adopt gendered attitudes which secure and/or enforce male privilege and power; how women are expected to be altruistic and submissive in deference of male privilege; and, that in order to be a woman, a female must be socialized into the practices and ideologies of femininity and domesticity and perpetuate this system on behalf of males. These are some of the core functions of gender, situated at the interface of the relationship between women and men, as a construct in all human societies.

Rachel Wambui, writing in the Daily Nation, recounts the experience of a professional Kenyan woman with the deeply entrenched patriarchal perceptions and expectations that continue to predominate that society. Having offered and poured a cup of tea for a male colleague who was in a lower position within the company, she was rewarded with the following statement of approval: 'You are a good Kikuyu woman...you know your place ...you may be well educated but you have not



forgotten your roots – you are to be subordinate to men’ (Wambui, 2016). This attitude is incredibly widespread in many African societies and is considered a concession to females having accessed education and working salaried positions outside the home.

Human societies of the late 19th to early 20th centuries began to express new ideas through concepts and language that reflected changes in the law, politics, production systems and cultural experiences, especially within the European and North American regions (largely as a consequence of the largess that followed the colonial plunder of societies in other parts of the world). Women, too, realized the need to craft a lexicon that would articulate how far they had come in the human journey and the intellectual traditions they had established. The notion of gender as an explanatory tool emerged out of the radical resistance to the re-entrenchment of patriarchal hegemony in the moment of capitalist hubris.

As a feminist construct, gender acquires the ability to expose the systems and hierarchies along which power travels within sites of culture, economics, politics, religion, the law, language and an entire host of sites where women and men relate to each other. As an analytical tool, it is dependent upon an ideological discourse that critically explores and exposes male power and the systems that sustain such power.

Feminists like Virginia Wolfe, who insisted upon the legitimacy and relevance of women’s ideas and intellectual worth, provided the stepping stones towards the imagination of gender as a critical feminist concept. By the middle of the past century, women everywhere were finding ways of using this concept to radicalize their understanding of supposedly ‘normal female roles’, particularly in the domestic arena, and of critiquing exclusionary practices aimed at keeping women out of the public spaces of their respective societies.



## The hijacking and depolitization of gender

It was the realization that feminism would pose the biggest threat to the interests of the West and of men generally, which instigated the project of depoliticizing the core concept of feminist analysis through what became known as ‘gender mainstreaming’. In Africa for example, nationalist politics, which quickly pushed women back into their ‘traditional roles’ after the moment of independence, would be jeopardized by the introduction of radical political discourse that was premised on a feminist critique of Patriarchy and male power. In collusion with ‘development partners’ a systematic redefinition of what gender conceptually meant was initiated as part of the development discourse that accompanied aid and grants to the societies of the majority South.

Initially, the reactionary backlash against the notion of gender were premised on the claims that there was no gender in African societies. But over the past four decades, a shift has occurred, leading to the normalization of gender as a discursive tool within various civil society groups, among donors and policy makers at various levels of the state, internationally.

More recently, the United Nations agencies have taken on a leading role in not only redefining feminist concepts relating to bodily integrity, sexual and reproductive rights and notions of sexuality, girlhood, and peace. These institutions are now leading the campaign of 'taming' feminism from being an identity and politics that was shunned and considered repugnant into a fashionable and acceptable notion that even men can position themselves within. By 'mainstreaming' gender conceptually – that is, by relocating the notion epistemologically within a liberal philosophy and discourse which is unable to effectively expose and challenge systems and infrastructures of male power and privilege – these custodians of the status quo have managed to achieve two important objectives: they have robbed gender of its critical sharp edges as a radical analytical tool and they have depoliticized women's engagements with Patriarchy.

One also notices two very interesting political trends that intersect with feminism as an ideologically contested political site and identity. On one hand, there is the clear emergence of what is becoming widely recognized as 'Twitter Feminism'. On the other hand, one is encountering very concerted attempts by female nationalists to appropriate the term 'feminism' and its identity, by insisting that feminism is about gender equality for everyone and that it is not anti-patriarchal or anti-men. In this fascinating yet quite disturbing entry of nationalist ideologues (both women and men) into the domain of feminism as a resistance ideology and practice, we recognize not only the crisis of neo-colonial nationalist failure to deliver the independence dispensation – the failure of which is clearly reflected in the uprisings of working people and women across the continent's societies– but more crucially, we can detect a deliberate strategy to re-politicize feminism as a contemporary version of gendered nationalism; thereby stripping it of its uniquely radical traditions of resistance to the status quo.

As the term 'gender mainstreaming' implies, gender became part and parcel of the mainstream status quo, part of the language of co-optation and compromised. Gender activists have become the new custodians of gender equality across the broad spectrum of the civil society and state institutions. Gender has been 'defanged' and it is now safe. Structurally, for example, the language used to refer to patriarchal violation and the exercise of sexual impunity is Gender Based Violence – a technocratic expression that has virtually no conceptual or theoretical value in women's resistance to patriarchal violation and supremacist behaviour.

The new appropriation campaign of radical language is reflected in the debate around feminism and identity. Men are naming themselves feminist, heads of patriarchal states are becoming custodians of feminism – it is an onslaught on the very core of women's radical politics and consciousness. This is one of the most important challenges facing us as women who understand the importance of protecting and expanding the narratives and meanings of our political freedom.



## Strengthening feminist resistance to the new manifestations of Patriarchy

While defending feminism politically as a resistance to the status quo, certain non-negotiable principles help to concentrate on the essence of the struggle and not be diverted by the Patriarchy's embracement tactics.

- **Intersectionality beyond 'isms':** The vision for the kind of feminist future we are working towards must be one beyond sexism, beyond racism, beyond classism, beyond homophobia, beyond ageism. Where our differences have been used as a notorious tool to keep us centred on the fight, we must see them as 'creative rather than divisive' (Lorde, 1984). We cannot separate our differences, nor are they the same; and yet, none of us is free, until we are all free. The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the earth. The cost is a mundane process that requires reflection on how we all have been, in our own ways, complicit in divisiveness. The true essence of intersectionality, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, requires a multi-dimensional look into the ways Patriarchy, and by extension other forms of oppression, intersect and affect diverse womyn, differently. Intersectionality brings together two of the most important strands of contemporary feminist thought and has been, in various ways, concerned with the issue of difference. The first strand has been devoted to understanding the effects of race, class, and gender on womyn's identities, experiences, and struggles for empowerment. By going beyond our own individual oppressions, we can practice true solidarity. This ability to understand and acknowledge the variance in contexts, experiences and cultures, whilst acknowledging that the common goal is to dismantle the Patriarchy and redistribute power, is one of the core necessities of feminism practice.



- **Broadening our understanding of our constituency:** The invisibility of many constituents in the movement and the systemic erasure of specific groups of women who face unique and significant vulnerabilities warrant specific acknowledgment and righting of wrongs within the feminist movement. It is important to acknowledge trans-womyn within feminist movements, sex workers within feminist movements, poor womyn within movements for reproductive rights, etc. and deliberately make sure that each is represented and heard. We must be able to not only believe deeply in the importance of inclusion but infuse it into every aspect of our work, seeking out the voices of those womyn who have traditionally been left out or othered. Without this intersection and inclusion effort, we risk erasing important voices and contributions to the movement as well the danger of a 'single Chimamanda'.<sup>7</sup> The result is the lack of nuanced responses and approaches to realities that are not similar to one's own reality. The beauty with true inclusivity, however, is that it allows every womyn the chance to ably speak on their own experiences. While it is true that all of us are essentially fighting the same type of Patriarchy, acknowledging that it manifests itself in different ways, is essential. Understanding, for example, that Patriarchy reacts differently to a middle-class, educated and cisgendered womyn than it reacts to an openly queer middle-class womyn or a working-class womyn is imperative. Recognizing that certain groups of womyn face multi-layered facets explains why intersectionality as a radical, non-negotiable approach to feminism is crucial for the movement.

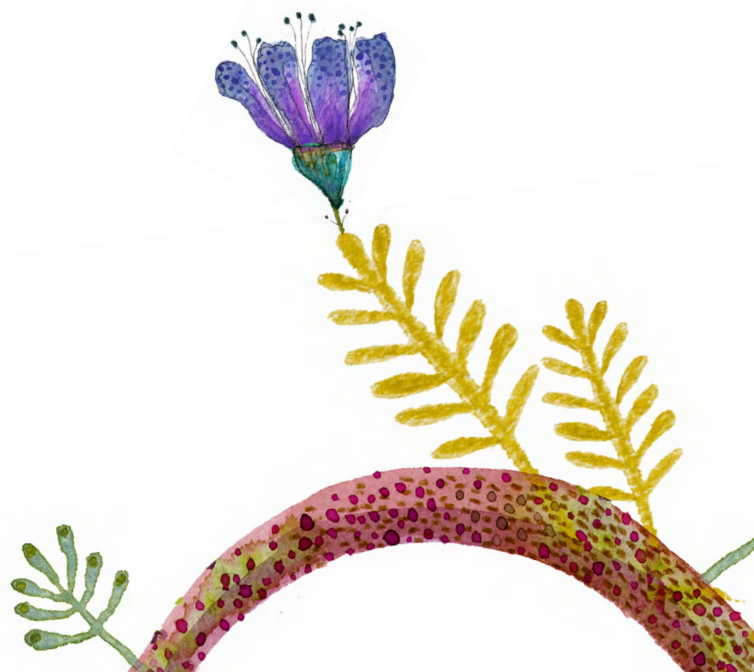
<sup>7</sup> The danger of a "single Chimamanda" has been described by the Kenyan feminist Schaeffer Okore during the second Feminist Idea Laboratory, Uganda 2018. It refers to the phenomenon of putting one feminist woman – as it happens with the famous Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – on a pedestal and demanding that she represents and speaks for all African women, regardless of their differences.

- **Unpacking gender roles:** Gender binaries and our caged, limited definitions of womynhood is a box that we must smash. Patriarchy has relied on relegating the roles of womyn to limited and controlled areas as well as creating different diversions and divisions between womyn and other oppressed groups. Dismantling gender roles is essential to dismantling Patriarchy and that means dismantling the limited knowledge, the fear and the biases we have about sexuality and gender itself. We must broaden our scope of how we think about womyn by extending our definition of womynhood beyond the stereotypical roles such as chaste caregiver, wife, mother. These limiting notions have kept womyn confined to the chains of Patriarchy. Unshackling shakes the very foundation that Patriarchy is laid on. Perhaps one of the biggest splits with the movement lies within. That work also includes unpacking and re-defining what masculinity looks like, away from the violent, macho, stereotypes that have been presented and continue to harm womyn in so many ways.

- **Solidarity, Sisterhood and the love of women** is central to the feminist movement. It is this love that grounds and moves us to continue to do the hard work of movement building and fighting Patriarchy. Bell Hooks speaks about this love as the extraordinary reserves of strength, the will to keep on challenging White supremacist capitalist Patriarchy (Hooks, 2015). Patriarchy has convinced us for many years that womyn cannot exist unless as competitors with each other. It has watered down the power of female friendships and convinced many of us that solidarity with each other is not possible. Therefore, the revolutionary act of unlearning these sad tales that many of us have been conditioned to believe for so long is vital to this struggle. Talking about sisterhood and overcoming difference can only come from a place of love, and by extension, a commitment to channel this love to do the work that is required to create the fundamental changes

that we need. As said by Adrienne Rich, 'the connections between womyn and among womyn are the most potentially transforming force on the planet' (Rich, 1996). Embracing these connections, we believe, is one of the radical non-negotiables necessary for radical change. This influences feminist theorizing, work and action. The personal is political. The acknowledgment that our personal experiences can all be traced to our location within larger power systems is vital for our understanding of Patriarchy.

- **Anger:** We would like to argue that anger is a necessary non-negotiable. The prominence of feminism in previous years has had a lot more to do with being co-opted by capitalism and celebrity as opposed to womyn 'having had enough'. For many, womyn's anger, much like our sexual autonomy, has been a taboo. The fear of womyn's anger, and then by extension the need to control it, is just another fear of womyn breaking free from the normative bonds of social control and rejecting the imposed titles of "peace-keepers". We have internalized that anger, along with all our strong emotions, are not rational reactions to the pain, abuse and dehumanization that we experience. Instead, We would like for us to embrace the anger we feel, and use that as tool for transformation, as the 'fuel' that drives and motivates the fight. Hand-holding, non-radical, non-confrontational type of politics unfortunately will not give us the change we desire.



## A Feminism of resistance and the power of the working class

Some of the most powerful and resolute feminists in the herstorical<sup>8</sup> resistance of women's struggles against the Patriarchy were working-class women. From Claudia Jones to Lilian Ngoyi, the dynamic traditions of working-class struggles against capitalist exploitation reinforced radical feminist ideology and activism in very fundamental ways. Clearly the intersection between race, class and gender speak to the centrality of the relationships of struggle and resistance between working women (e.g. on the shop floor, the commodity agricultural fields, the domestic arena as workers, as wives), especially between feminist ideology and identity in profoundly significant ways.

Working women are the earliest custodians of Patriarchal resistance in all our societies. It is through their labour that capitalism everywhere has been able to appease men into colluding with gendered systems of oppression. Most men remain fierce defenders of patriarchal masculinity and the subordination of women – whether through racial or class systems. Men everywhere participate in one way or another in the maintenance of mechanisms that offer them the option to assure their dominance and to use Patriarchy to control women.

While middle-class women have been able to employ domestic labour to 'ease' their burden of household exploitation – and thus participate in the exploitation of other women in very egregious forms, working class women rarely have the means of

using another woman's labour. They cannot afford the appliances that make life easier for middle-class women; they are paid the lowest wages, together with their sisters in agriculture; and, they have the least access to health care, state protections, and the most basic resources needed to live a life of dignity and self-worth. When there is the slightest crisis in capitalism, working women bear the heaviest brunt. Their mortality rates are the lowest among women universally and their chances of coming out of economic and political exclusion are the most tenuous. In Africa, it is among women of the working class – both urban and rural – that patriarchal feudalism is most deeply entrenched, with constant discourses of authenticity imposed as a requirement of their identities as women and as Africans.

So yes, feminism has everything to do with the working class and what has been happening to working women everywhere, forever. However, debates around the political relevance of feminism for working women have been intersected by the difficult challenges of race, privilege, ability, social location, and differences in consciousness about identity, bodily integrity and how to resist Patriarchy in solidarity with other groups/classes of women.

Currently, the tourism industry is one important example of how capitalism has extended its reach into every corner of human society, extracting female labour in new and urgent ways, by drawing on the features of domesticity, care, hospitality and submissiveness--the essence of what humans consider 'home' -- to further exploit and degrade women and girls. As Truong argues, female sexuality has become regarded as an 'economic asset' in many southern countries. It is a resource that brings in 'foreign exchange' as part of development and governments turn a blind eye, allowing for prostitution as 'clean sex' within the tourism industry. In this way, the ideology of hospitality, servitude and self-sacrifice inherent in the traditional

<sup>8</sup> The term 'her-story' is a feminist response to the hegemonic definition of the human narrative from a masculine perspective (i.e. that what we narrate and retell/recall about the human journey is 'his-story' rather than 'our-story'). By challenging the term and positioning 'her-story' alongside the androcentric telling of human achievements and failures, feminists are insisting that through a re-conceptualization of the human narrative from a women's perspective. By centering women in the meaning and recognition of human existence, we create the necessary counter-balance that enables us to shift to a more inclusive and fuller representation of where we have been and what we have become as human beings.

female role is used in combination with the ideology of nationalism – to assert new forms of control and exploitation over women.

However, a parallel practice of exploitation and degradation of women as commoditized bodies, used to breed and labour on behalf of individual males or lineages owned by males, existed prior to the wholesale plunder of Black bodies for White supremacist power. In the absence of a radical feminist critique of the historical interfaces between the socio-cultural and political systems that normalized the exploitation of women's bodies and their creative capacities (through cultural rituals, language, taboos and practices) and the economic systems that provide every male with the opportunity to become a man (the political economy of patriarchal power), Africans tend to be conflated into a genderless mass of colonially oppressed bodies whose freedom is dependent upon a nationalist ideology of retrieval of a largely unblemished past, which is infused by notions of romanticism and authenticity. When women are referenced, it is still mainly through the allegory of motherhood and notions of femaleness which complement the nationalist discourse of retrieving what was lost during colonialism.

## African feminism and black nationalism

Speaking about the lionization of both Winnie Madikizela Mandela and Wambui Waiyaki Otieno in the online journal *Pambazuka*, Grace A. Musila insightfully notes that

‘to a large extent, both the critique and affirmation these two women have attracted in their lives has been largely anchored on assumptions about “proper” conduct for “public” figures of their stature, on one hand; and equally constraining assumptions about women as metaphoric receptacles of phallogocentric notions of motherhood, widowhood, morality and the decorum of icons on the other’ (2011).

The nationalist emphasis on the racial exploitation of Black bodies, without an accompanying critique of the patriarchal commoditization of Black female bodies of all ages as the property of males, has often resulted in an outright rejection of women's demands for an autonomous discourse and representation of themselves as persons in their own right. This demand, which is central to African feminist ideas and activism, is still treated as an expression of ‘alienation’ from the normative notions of politically appropriate behaviour by Black women, on the continent and the wider diaspora. Such notions, which are dominant, discursively and ideologically across Africa's knowledge-scapes, treat feminism as an expression of ‘otherness’ from nationalism, as the supposedly communal and ‘natural’ place for Black women. The womanist movement, which is in many ways a gendered echo of Black nationalist ideology and identity, has consistently insisted on this counter-narrative to feminism, even as some of its proponents use the term feminism to articulate what are in effect conservative perspectives on the lives and struggles of African women on the continent (Mikell, 1997).

Most of the second half of the 20th century was dominated by the debate on whether African



women could be feminist and what African feminism was or meant, within the context of developmentalism and other globalizing discourses on African societies. It culminated in an interesting array of arguments and debates, texts and scripts that partially reflect the persistence of the colonial tradition of 'speaking for Africans' by Northerners, both White and Black, and mainly female. Defining what African feminism was (this trend seems to have abated in the early 21st century) became an industry. Within the northern academy; a specialization which in many instances fitted neatly into an already existing genre of anthropological and ethnographic discourses that interrogated the bodies and lives of African women on the continent as essentially 'exotic subjects'.

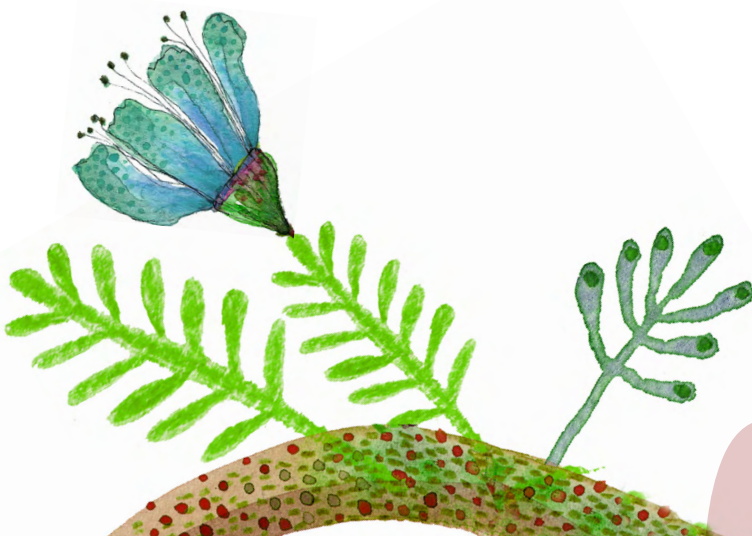
As well, these intellectual stirrings and debates were an expression of the emergence and expansion of theoretical and conceptual engagements that African women on the continent were grappling with among themselves, in the wake of the failure of the independence state to deliver social and material justice to Africans as a whole. The establishment of women's organizations which called for gender equality and women's human rights across the societies of the continent provided fertile ground for the accompanying emergence of contestations about who African women were, and what their political and ideological identities and realities were. (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

## *Arenas and means for a contemporary African feminism*

- *Self-care as a radical feminist practice.* Audre Lorde said it best when she said, 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence it is self-preservation and an act of political welfare' (Lorde, 1984). Once again, we must resist the urge to appropriate radical feminist principles and turn them into individualistic and capitalistic catch phrases. "The term self-care should not simply be a synonym for stress relief or me-time or generalized femmey indulgence".<sup>9</sup> Self-care is communal without decentering the individual and can work with the tensions in the communities, making each of us accountable to each other and recommitting to caring about ourselves and others. It is important that we recognize our own learning, our own pain and our own limits to consciously extend ourselves to each other and call upon each other's strengths is a lifesaving strategy.

- *Organizing against differences.* No other option than to work together for our mutual survival. But what does organizing diversity look like in terms of accountability, solidarity and individual interests? To be able to look past our own pre-conditioned biases, to realize that the enemy is one we have in common, is necessary for the movement's survival. Perhaps one of the biggest lies that Patriarchy told us was that we are different, and that those differences then define who we must align with. We have so acutely internalized the idea that we cannot jointly fight together that it seeps through everything we do. It has become a part of what we believe and we do not challenge it. We would like to believe that perhaps the greatest weapon we have is our ability to look past these differences and understand the power of the united front. Living true intersectionality is a challenge, but it is one that we must be willing to undertake if we want to carry the feminist label.

<sup>9</sup> A tweet from @nataliereed84





That can only come from an understanding of how we too have kept the wheel of oppression turning. Cisgendered womyn must be willing to reflect on their own violence towards trans-womyn; heterosexual womyn towards LB womyn; middle-class womyn on how they treat working class womyn, etc. The process of introspection and unlearning, while difficult, is the only way to begin to move towards intersectionality. The process of allyship can only begin from that point.

### - Internet as a tool we can co-opt to topple

**Patriarchy:** Young feminists, specifically in Africa, have learnt how to use the internet to speak on 'all issues feminism'. They have mobilized, taught and resisted on the internet. Now, the internet is still a mirror of the Patriarchy and by extension, many of the manifestations are emboldened online with the added illusion of anonymity. However, this has not stopped the radical and important change that feminists are creating by wielding these online tools. Today, even with the enormous load of work that remains, we can confidentially say that feminists have cleaned the timeline. Whether this new tidiness reflects in society offline is a conversation for another day. This achievement is possible because of the nature of digital spaces. A large and already convened audience that is almost too eager to receive information and participate in conversation. As a result, information is disseminated, free education is offered, and miscommunication countered – daily and in real time. Mindsets change. Thought is provoked. The status quo is challenged. This is perhaps the biggest win of taking feminism online (Ninsiima, 2018). Across all of Africa, feminist have rallied behind each other's causes, spreading global awareness and redefining what solidarity looks like. Even without physical contact, they have managed to create deep bonds where they learn from, stand up for and support each other. The ripple effect of taking feminism online is not one that we can discount. This movement has introduced

feminist ideals to generations that would perhaps not have been able to access them or even have picked up any interest in these conversations. On June 30th, 2018, Ugandan women and allies took to the streets to protest the brutal kidnappings and murders of womyn in Uganda, which totalled 42 womyn since May 2017, and the lack of government and police intervention to protect womyn. In a campaign launched and run primarily on social media under #WomensMarchUG, feminists from across the continent and beyond mobilized to put pressure on police and state institutions. In Uganda's recent history, it was unique and unprecedented to hold a peaceful and successful march.



- *Language as a reclamation of our agency.* How do we disrupt the dominant language but make sure that it is inclusive? For example, how to ensure that it doesn't focus on only cis-womyn? There are no clear-cut answers to this question. But we cannot discount the power in reclaiming language and reclaiming our radical notions. Language expresses beliefs, values and customs. Language is therefore, in a certain way, an indicator for change of mindsets and behaviour.



As with all resistance language, those who have power and who work to maintain the status quo, inevitably find ways of appropriating such language to re-define its meaning and present a milder, more docile version which poses a lesser threat to the established order. With the notion of class, for example, it is important to recall how sociologists like C. Wright Mills (2000) in the US academy, systematically re-defined its meaning and social significance in terms of understanding who workers are within capitalist societies, particularly the societies of the 'advanced' capitalist regions. His work became part of the social science cannon in the second half of the 20th century, taught in sociology departments across the imperial world, while Marx and Engels in particular, were forbidden and only learnt through the interpretations of such re-constructionist scholars.

This appropriation and re-definition of the radical meaning with which Marx and Engels imbued the notion of class, by situating the idea at the interface of labour production and capitalist expropriation of that labour, was a deliberate strategy to undermine the radicalism of the construct and substitute that radicalism with a weak, basically shallow, intellectual copy that undermined the struggle dynamic between the working class and what is now called the corporate or business sector. The notion of class struggle as the motivating force of history was systematically removed from the discursive lexicon in all social science disciplines. A conciliatory and often blatantly anti-worker and anti-union language was substituted, which is the currently normative discourse of neo-liberalism and globalization.

- *Feminism as politics of all women?* Another challenge facing African contemporary feminism is the need to create more opportunities to engage in discussions about feminism as a politics of all women – in their varied and specific identities and locations – to get be-

yond the barriers that feed the tensions between women across class, racial and sexual difference. Can feminism be an ideology and politics of all women or is it that feminism, as an inclusive politics, can only aspire to include all women, but that each individual woman must assume the responsibility of endowing herself with the identity and living the praxis of feminism? These are difficult questions to engage, let alone resolve. Yet they do provide, in their complexity, unique opportunities for African feminists to continuously re-imagine and revitalize our radical notions and ways of being – an exercise which is crucial to the survival of women everywhere in a world suffocating from globalised greed and plunder.

- *Unpacking structural violence.* Finally, contemporary African feminism must look at the interface between Humanitarianism and the seemingly unfettered violation and sexual exploitation of girls, women and male children by militarized black men across the continent. That means looking at structural violence in situations of war/crisis as well as in so-called 'normal' societies, but also at the predatory behaviour of White males within the UN and humanitarian organizations towards girls and young women. This is a challenge that seems to be specific to Africans

everywhere and is rooted in the continuing racist, colonialist traditions that White men have enjoyed since the first encounters with African people. Images of White males surrounded by girls (and boys) who are clearly their concubines abound in the archival documentation of colonial interventions. The presumption that Black females are savages, sexually and physically, was and remains a common perception of White males who now represent the rescue politics of northern NGOs and government-funded donor agencies.

The depth of this impunity of abusive acts is still largely unacknowledged and may never really be fully exposed. But, it is crucial that we are not silenced by the fear of backlash in terms of funding agencies punishing those who excavate and expose this appalling behaviour, and who dare to link it with the persistence of White male privilege across our continent, as a key element of the violation of Black female bodies by males generally, and by White males in particular. The insistence that it is Black men who are sexual barbarians – even brought before the International Court of Justice for reckoning – must be tempered by a courageous exposure of all abhorrent male behaviour.



For example, centuries of slaving Africans into the territories that are known in the present day as the 'advanced' societies of the North is one of the most egregious expressions of human degradation, which still forms the bedrock of western privilege and power – impunity and the plunder of the human life force initiated through the brutal practices of primitive accumulation.

Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as race, and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat' (Federici, 2004).

It is an established fact that Whiteness as an ideology that extends privilege to humans who have constructed themselves as White, and specifically to White males, is premised on the deeply entrenched exploitation of Black bodies, and of people of colour generally. This is the political economy of capitalism as a racist, supremacist system of production and domination. And while slaving of female and young bodies has become one of the biggest sources of accumulation across

all societies (trafficking), the buying and selling of female bodies of colour remains the main source of wealth in this underworld trade. Therefore, it is no coincidence that at the intersections of race, class, gender, sex, and many other exclusionary systems which undergird patriarchal societies and perpetuate the normalcy of male privilege and power, we find women's bodies and lives.

Feminist political economy as a critical approach in explaining male privilege and power beyond the narrower confines of nationalist anti-racial and anti-colonial discourses provides a much deeper and more authentic analytical tool for the deconstruction of Patriarchy as a complex and often obfuscating system in terms of the socio-political, cultural and economic forces that sustain it. It also intersects with established radical critiques of capitalism as an exploitative system that has enriched a small minority of humans at the expense of the majority of humankind. The struggles of workers on the African continent, and everywhere, are situated at the nexus of patriarchal human exploitation – despite the generalized reluctance of male workers to acknowledge their gendered privilege even in the sites of capitalist exploitation ■



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## About the Series “Feminist Reflections”

The Series “Feminist Reflections” shares important contemplations emerging from the collective work of the *African Feminist Reflection and Action Group*. The group is composed of 40 feminist academics, social activists and progressive women from trade unions and in the political arena from different regions of the African continent. From November 2017 on, the group regularly came together to engage in critical debates around the challenges that derive from neoliberal development patterns and current political backlashes against women for a contemporary African feminist activism. The gatherings have been facilitated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s Mozambique office.

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She tweets at @triciatwasiima.

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