# Feminist Africa

Volume 3, Issue 1 • 2022

## African Women's Lives in the Time of a Pandemic

*Feminist Africa* is Africa's peer-reviewed journal of feminism, gender and women's studies, produced by and for the transnational community of feminist scholars. It provides a platform for intellectual and activist research, dialogue and strategy. *Feminist Africa* attends to the complex and diverse dynamics of creativity and resistance that have emerged in post-colonial Africa, and the manner in which these are shaped by the shifting global, geopolitical configurations of power.

It is currently based at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Accra.

**The e-version of this journal is available free on *Feminist Africa's* open-access website: https://feministafrica.net/**

# Feminist Africa 2022, Volume 3, Issue 1 African Women's Lives in the Time of a Pandemic

First published in March 2022 by the
Institute of African Studies
University of Ghana
Kwame Nkrumah Complex
Anne Jiagge Road
P.O. Box LG 73
Legon, Accra
Ghana.



ISSN: 1726-4596



FA is published with the support of AWDF, Ford Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Open Society Initiative for East Africa and Foundation for a Just Society.

Typesetting and Printing: University of Ghana Press
Cover design: Eibhlín Ní Chléirigh
Photo Description: Tanzania-January 2021
Cover Image Credit: Mirosław Nowaczyk

## Editorial Policy

*Feminist Africa* is guided by a profound commitment to transforming gender hierarchies in Africa and seeks to redress injustice and inequality in its content and design, and by its open-access and continentally-targeted distribution strategy. *Feminist Africa t*argets gender researchers, students, educators, women's organisations and feminist activists throughout Africa. It works to develop a feminist intellectual community by promoting and enhancing African women's intellectual work. To overcome the access and distribution challenges facing conventional academic publications, *Feminist Africa* uses the internet as a key tool for knowledge-sharing and communication, while making hard copies available to those based at African institutions.

Two issues are produced per annum, in accordance with themes specified in the calls for contributions. The editorial team can be contacted at contact@feministafrica.net and general enquiries sent to info@feministafrica.net


## Acknowledgements

The *Feminist Africa* Editors, Associate Editors and Editorial Team acknowledge the intellectual input of the community of African feminist scholars and the Editorial Advisory Board. Akosua K. Darkwah would like to acknowledge, with gratitude, the intellectual contributions of Amina Mama and Dzodzi Tsikata in the conceptualisation and production of this issue.


## Disclaimer

The views expressed by contributors to *Feminist Africa* are not necessarily those of the Editors, Editorial Advisory Board, the Institute of African Studies, or our partners. While every reasonable effort is made to check factual accuracy in published material, the contributors are ultimately responsible for verifying claims made in their writings. Neither *Feminist Africa* nor the Institute of African Studies will be responsible for errors or inaccuracies in contributions.




### FA Volume 3 Issue 1 Editor

Akosua Keseboa Darkwah

## Manuscript Submissions
*Feminist Africa* has a submissions policy determined by its focus on continental feminist studies and activism. Periodic calls for contributions along particular themes guide submissions. All contributions must register the centrality of feminist politics and critical gender analysis to past, present and ongoing processes of social, political and cultural change in Africa. We regret that we cannot respond to all unsolicited submissions. Please submit contributions electronically to info@feministafrica.net We regret that we do not currently have the editorial capacity to consider contributions in languages other than English. All submissions to *Feminist Africa* must use the house style sheet and should not include graphics. Feature articles should not exceed 6500 words. Other contributions should not exceed 2000 words.

## Editorial Procedure

Contributions submitted to *Feminist Africa* are considered by the Editorial Team. Feature articles will be subjected to blind peer-review by readers with expertise in relevant areas. Editorial discretion in relation to submitted work resides with the FA Editors and the Editorial Team.

## Copyright and Reproduction



## Distribution

FA Community, IAS, University Libraries

# Contents

# Editorial

Akosua K. Darkwah

This issue of *Feminist Africa* reflects on both the impact of COVID-19 on African women and African women's responses to the pandemic. As a continent, Africa has endured decades of economic, political and social crises. Since the colonial period, the continent has been a primary commodity producer, supplying the world with both mineral resources such as gold, diamonds, coltan, manganese as well as bauxite and agricultural exports such as coffee, tea and cocoa. The prices of primary commodities are very volatile (Ocran and Biekpe, 2007) leading to cyclical economic crises on the continent. Since the 1980s as well, the neoliberal project undertaken on the continent with instructions from the international financial institutions has led to state withdrawal from the market and privatisation of social services such as education and health. As Abiru (2018) reminds us, the continuing impact of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s on the continent's economy cannot be discounted. In addition, the continent is yet to fully recover from the triple energy, food and financial crises of the 2000-2010 period (Fosu, 2013; Fosu, 2018).

Politically, the continent has fared no better. The independence governments of the 1960s were soon to be overthrown by military rulers. Between 1960 and 2000, the continent experienced an average of 4 coups a year with Burkina Faso topping the list with 8 coups since its independence (Mwai, 2022). Long term presidents, such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who ruled for 30 years, Yoweri Museveni in power in Uganda since 1986 and 89-year old Paul Biya who is in his fortieth year as president of Cameroon, are also a feature of the continent's political system. Since 2000 as well, 25 presidents have attempted to amend constitutional provisions to enable them run for a third term in office; 18 of them have succeeded (Zounmenou, 2020).

On the social front as well, the situation is abysmal. Public health facilities are inadequate and poorly funded across the continent. Only a small minority with the financial wherewithal can access good quality health care. For the majority of the population, a fairly minor health crisis in other parts of the world, such as kidney stones, could easily lead to death (Azevedo, 2017). Similarly, on the education front,

the situation is dire. Half of the world's population of children who are out of school live on the continent. Those who are in school are not necessarily learning. In 2017, 90% of African children aged between 6 and 14 who were tested in reading and mathematics did not meet minimum proficiency levels (Paul, 2021). In spite of this reality, comprehensive social policies that would ensure that each citizen on the continent receives at minimum the basic human needs for education, health and security are a rarity on the continent (Adesina, 2015).

The continent is also by far the poorest globally. In fact, nine of the ten poorest countries in the world are located in Africa (World Population Review, 2022). On nearly every index of human development, the continent fares rather poorly. Indeed, of the 32 countries ranked lowest on the 2020 Human Development Index, only three are not located in Africa (UNDP, 2020). African women bear the brunt of the range of socio-economic burdens that come from living in countries that fare poorly on the Human Development Index. Nonetheless, across the continent, regardless of the socio-economic difficulties, women find ways to ensure the social reproduction of their families. Daily, against the odds, food ingredients are procured, meals prepared, and families fed. Women are also the de facto health personnel in families: when a family cannot afford to seek healthcare, it is the women in the family who will provide care to the ill at home. Further, they are the ones most likely to sell their last valuable item to ensure that a child gets the opportunity to attend school.

This was the state of affairs as at 11 March 2020 when the Director of the World Health Organisation, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Soon after, many African countries began to receive their first cases of the virus. As if those on the continent were not burdened enough with a range of socio-economic problems, we also had to endure both the health implications of the pandemic – having lost hundreds of thousands to the pandemic so far – and the economic difficulties that came with various government containment measures. Although these measures run the gamut from minimal restrictions, as in the case of Tanzania, to strict restrictions for extended periods of time, as in South Africa, no country on the continent has been spared the ravages of this pandemic. As Pereira and Tsikata (2021: 6) remind us, "COVID is yet one more crisis to add to the existing string of disasters" on the continent. Since 2020, there have been four waves of the pandemic, the last of which was in 2021 when two new variants of the virus (Omicron and Delcron) emerged.

Quite a bit of research has been undertaken over the last two years to explore the impact of the virus on Africa's population. These include African Arguments' collaborative effort with OXFAM to explore the impact of the pandemic on food security on the continent (African Arguments, 2021), INCLUDE Netherlands' funded studies on the nature and gendered impact of policy responses to the pandemic[1], and the International Development Research Centre's raft of funding opportunities exploring, among others, the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition and food security in Sub-Saharan Africa (IDRC, 2021). Scholars working on the informal economy have also documented the impact of both containment and mitigation measures on workers around the world. These scholars have demonstrated how these measures have gravely affected workers in the informal economy, many of whom need to work every day to be able to put food on their tables (Chen *et al*., 2021; Osei *et al*., 2021).

In spite of all these efforts, there is little by way of fine-grained analysis of the lived experiences of African women during the pandemic. Similarly, African women's responses to the pandemic have been poorly documented, with the exception, perhaps, of the *African Feminist post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement*. This statement, signed by African feminists and feminist organisations numbering in the hundreds, and presented to the five eminent Africans designated by the African Union to mobilise international support in addressing the pandemic (Pereira and Tsikata, 2021: 8), represents but one effort to respond to the crisis the pandemic has triggered. Across the continent, every day, women, working in their individual capacities or as collectives, have found ways to support other women burdened by the ramifications of the pandemic. Their voices and their stories deserve to be shared. This Special Issue is an effort to do just that, to put African women front and centre in an analysis not only of the impact that COVID-19 has had on women's lives, but also on the efforts that African women have made to address the challenges it has presented. This Special Issue combines academic pieces and conversations with key actors involved in addressing the challenges the pandemic has presented, as well as women's own accounts of their frontline activities over the last two years. It seeks to address some of the many questions that remain unresolved even as we continue to deal with the fallouts of the pandemic, such as: what has been the impact of the pandemic on African women from different socio-economic backgrounds? What kinds of structural transformations will enable us to beat back the pandemic and its multiple ramifications? What roles have women played in developing innovative

1 See the suite of articles at https://includeplatform.net/publications/

solutions to many aspects of the pandemic? This Special Issue explores some of these questions from the perspective of a variety of authors across the continent.

The first of our feature pieces takes a broad-range approach to the subject of COVID-19 on the continent. In this piece, Kinoti and Kelleher critique African governments' approaches to containing the pandemic, an approach which was steeped in the neoliberal logic that has underpinned the economic approach these states have adopted since the 1980s. In the formulation of policies and programmes, this neoliberal logic fails to take into account the needs of citizens in a primarily informal economy such as persists on the African continent. Nor is this approach particularly gender-sensitive. No wonder, then, that the UNDP/UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker finds that only 32 per cent of the 842 social protection and labour market measures adopted by African governments have been gender sensitive (UNDP, n.d.). Roughly half of these gender-sensitive interventions have addressed domestic violence, the incidence of which has increased quite dramatically over the last two years of the pandemic. In one study conducted by a Sahelian NGO, for example, it was found that, in the six Sahelian countries of the study, domestic violence (physical or verbal) increased by as much as 12 percent, on average, during the pandemic. In Chad, the increase was as large as 30 percent (JDW-Sahel, 2020). Given the reality on the ground, Kinoti and Kelleher provide a searing critique of the many ways in which government efforts fell far short of what would be expected of states that pay attention to the needs of women. They conclude by suggesting that this pandemic offers the continent an opportunity to break from the past and to adopt an African feminist perspective on how to run an economy in ways that serve the needs of the African population.

In the second feature article, Frehiwot et al. describe the lived experiences of female academics at the University of Ghana during the pandemic. They show how women expanded their caregiving roles beyond the confines of their immediate families, both nuclear and extended, to include community members as well. This expansion in social reproduction roles occurred even as monumental changes were taking place in the world of work as these female academics knew it. Online learning, which had barely been used by most of the faculty members prior to the pandemic, became the major mode of teaching and all academics, whether saddled with social reproduction responsibilities or not, had to learn how to use these tools and deploy them in their classes rather quickly. As could be expected, in extending themselves in these many ways while maintaining all their teaching responsibilities,

the self-reported productivity levels of the female academics in this study dropped. Given the lack of institutional recognition of the undue burdens placed on female academics during this period, the authors conclude that COVID-19 will potentially have long-lasting impacts on the career progression of these women.

The third feature article, by Darkwah et al., provides a gender analysis of the containment and mitigation measures that the governments of Burkina Faso and Ghana introduced in the wake of the pandemic. This piece takes the gender analysis of the pandemic as undertaken by Frehiwot et al. further by focusing on the efforts of African governments and interrogating the ways in which the nature of containment and mitigation measures exacerbated gender inequalities in their societies. The analysis shows that various containment measures such as market and border closures severely impacted the economic fortunes of low-income traders in both countries, many of whom literally live from hand to mouth with little to no savings to tide them over during long periods of abstention from economic activities. Similarly, the mitigation measures of these states, particularly the support for businesses, were biased towards large-scale, formal enterprises, the majority of which do not belong to women in these two economies. In demonstrating the gender blind-spots of the Burkinabe and Ghanaian governments, the analysis highlights the male-centric nature of these states and echoes Kinoti and Kelleher's call for a rethinking of the economic policymaking of these states going forward.

In her standpoint piece, Leah Eryenyu also echoes Kinoti and Kelleher in calling for a new world economic order. Eryenyu reflects on the stark differences between the Global North and Global South, a difference most blatantly obvious in what the Namibian president Hage Geingob has called a "vaccine apartheid" – the situation where, while more than 82 per cent of available COVID-19 vaccines have gone to wealthy countries in the Global North, only 1 per cent have gone to the low-income countries in the Global South (Sarkar, 2021). Thus, while the majority of African citizens aged above 18 have not received even the first dose of the vaccine, in countries in the Global North, many adults have received a second and even a third booster dose and the vaccine is available to children as well. Eryenyu concludes her piece by offering what she calls a "cocktail of treatment for our current ailing political-economic order."

In calling for a new world economic order, both Kinoti and Kelleher in their feature article and Eryenyu in her standpoint piece share much in common with others in the Pan-African feminist community. Early in the pandemic, members of

this community penned an open letter to the five Africans selected as the African Union's Special Envoys mandated to seek international support for Africa's recovery efforts. In that statement, 12 recommendations were presented as to how to break the stranglehold of the neoliberal regime to ensure that Africa recovered from the pandemic on the right footing (African Feminism, 2020). As we make the slow, steady journey to a world, not necessarily post COVID-19, but that incorporates it in the myriad of burdens we face, African governments will do very well to heed the demands of the signatories to this statement.

While some feminists rallied to put together a plan for the continent post COVID-19, others, such as Vainola Makan and Wendy Pekeur, set to work addressing the many challenges that the pandemic had presented. In the rest of the pieces in this Special Issue, we highlight the efforts of various women and women's rights organisations across the continent to address different aspects of the pandemic. First are the three frontline pieces that document the efforts of small women's rights organisations to tackle specific problems created by the pandemic. In a rural farming community in the Western Cape region of South Africa, two women friends came together to work on a series of issues confronting women in their community. There were many problems to resolve – mouths to feed, money to find for other daily essentials, adequate water to ensure that the handwashing regimen required in the COVID-19 era could be maintained, and survivors of domestic violence trapped in lockdown with their abusers to be rescued from such an environment. So, they set to work doing a range of things including providing seedlings for home gardens, helping with the filling of forms to claim unemployment insurance or the R350 COVID-19 grant, knocking on the doors of municipal officials to ensure that the right to water enshrined in South Africa's Constitution was guaranteed, and breaching rules about mobility to rescue survivors of domestic violence.

Still in South Africa, Enza Social Research, a feminist NGO long concerned with Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Femicide, organised a series of webinars to which activists working on similar issues were invited. Participants came from six countries on the continent, including South Africa. Together, these women pointed out the ways in which state responses to COVID-19 were gender-insensitive and how they had to work with state officials to address these gaps in the containment measures adopted by African governments. A key lapse in the early containment measures was the complete disregard for the possibility that lockdown measures would put women in abusive relationships at risk and make them even more

vulnerable; evidenced by the fact that service providers had not also been designated essential service providers. Restrictions on mobility for domestic violence service providers in a number of countries such as Nigeria and Kenya had to be rescinded to enable these service providers address the needs of survivors of domestic violence. Basically, women's rights activists who work on domestic violence had to advocate to be considered essential service providers and to be treated as such. These service providers also pointed to the importance of self-care during this period. This is crucial, given the increased incidence of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of the pandemic. Without attention to their own physical and mental health, the service providers themselves were at risk of experiencing burnout.

The need to be flexible and able to adapt quickly to the reality on the ground was not just a requirement for state officials and service providers dealing with domestic violence. Shamillah Wilson, who works at a women's fund agency in Tanzania, points out the ways in which the internal processes of funding agencies had to be readjusted to enable the agency to respond to the persistent problems women face as well as the new burdens brought on by the pandemic. Extended proposal evaluation periods were not going to be very helpful during such a period when resources were desperately needed to address a range of problems. As such, the Women's Trust Fund in Tanzania streamlined their processes to enable them drastically reduce response times from three months to one month. A special call for proposals to address COVID-19 saw 42 proposals approved and funded in record time in 2020.

Four In Conversation pieces conclude this Special Issue. In Ghana, Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with Veronica Bekoe, a biological scientist who invented what has come to be known as the "Veronica bucket" in the early 1990s. Confronted with the reality, at the time, of no running water in many public health laboratories in the country, Mrs. Bekoe came up with a rather simple solution: she got an artisan to attach a tap to a bucket to provide a ready stream of water for handwashing in these laboratories. Three decades on, her invention has proven very useful in the country's fight against the pandemic. The simple tap attached to a bucket makes handwashing possible even in places without pipe-borne water. The device can now be found in front of many establishments across the country. Indeed, the Veronica bucket has even earned its own Wikipedia page! While there are many sophisticated versions of the bucket now, there is no denying that each one of them owes its origin to Veronica Bekoe's quest to resolve a problem she faced in her career. Rather

than throw her arms up in despair at the state of affairs at her workplace, Veronica Bekoe took it upon herself to address the issue and, in so doing, bequeathed to the Ghanaian nation a truly important public health intervention. Her contributions have been recognised by both the Ghana Health Service and the First Lady of the Republic of Ghana.

Another woman who has made great efforts to address some of the crises of the pandemic is the Cameroonian journalist, Comfort Mussa. Having experienced the challenges of living with a disability through the lived experience of her father, Comfort was particularly attuned to the additional burdens that COVID-19 placed on this group of marginalised people. They were already largely ignored in architectural design and the services provision, and Comfort Mussa was very well aware of how the measures to address COVID-19 were not being deployed in a manner that was sensitive to the unique needs of this population. Very little attention was being paid, for example, to how individuals with hearing impairments were going to keep abreast of news about COVID-19 protocols, when this information was only communicated orally. Nor were handwashing stations being set up in ways that ensured that individuals in wheelchairs could use them easily.

Comfort Mussa, therefore, set out to resolve this neglect in two ways. First, she wanted grants organisations and service providers to be powerfully reminded of the challenges that people with disability face and thus reinforce the need for them to set up systems that minimise the challenges these individuals face. To do so, she organised what she called a "feast of senses". These were three course dinners at which participants were denied one of their senses during each course of the meal. The difficulties they encountered powerfully reminded them of the importance of inclusion in their service delivery. Secondly, Mussa's organisation, SisterSpeak, developed a toolkit that identified the various ways in which people with disability were excluded in the delivery of COVID-19 services and how this could be addressed. In undertaking these two activities, Comfort Musah set out to disrupt and challenge the status quo in Cameroonian society, and her work on inclusion during the pandemic accomplished just that.

In the third piece in this Special Issue, we focus on Nigeria and the work of three women who are part of the Nigerian Feminist Forum: Buky Williams, who works at Education as a Vaccine, an organisation that focuses on the sexual health and reproductive rights of adolescents; Azeenarh Mohammed from The Initiative for Equal Rights, which works to protect the LGBT community in Nigeria, and Chitra

Nagarajan, who describes herself as a human rights advocate working with and for feminist movements, LGBT movements and disability movements. These three activists pointed out the ways in which the Nigerian government's mismanagement of the nation came to a head during the COVID-19 period. Citizens' frustrations with the state came to the fore and the feminist activist community worked on two major issues during this period.

The first major activity was feminists' declaration of a state of emergency regarding gender-based violence and their call for a systematic, concerted effort on the part of the Nigerian state to translate the 2015 law on domestic violence into services and policies that provided support to survivors of domestic violence. Second was the activism around police brutality and the campaign for more broadly improved governance and accountability that made global headlines in October 2020. The End SARS movement effort was spearheaded by a group of young feminists, the Feminist Coalition, who were applauded for starting a truly inclusive social movement, one that embraced individuals with different abilities and from all walks of life (Sule, 2020). Support for the Feminist Coalition's work grew quickly. Over a two-week period, they were able to raise nearly $400, 000 from both local and international sources in support of their work. Nonetheless, the favourable support that the Feminist Coalition earned from the Nigerian community did not last long. The group's inclusive approach, particularly their acceptance of the Nigerian LGBT community, eventually proved costly for them. The largely homophobic Nigerian population began to disparage them and, soon enough, the state clamped down on their activities. In spite of the pushback from the state, the End SARS movement demonstrated the power of feminist organising, albeit for a short period of time.

The final In Conversation piece in this Special Issue does not focus on the pandemic. It does, nonetheless, speak to the theme of agency which is so strongly embedded in the other pieces in this issue. Srila Roy and Caio Simões De Araújo at the University of Witwatersrand are in conversation with three African women scholars, each of whom published a book during the pandemic: Simidele Dosekun, Oluwakemi Balogun and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué. Each of their books speaks to a particular kind of feminism as understood by a particular group of elite African women. Simidele Dosekun studies women in Lagos who spend time, money and energy being what she calls "spectacularly feminine", that is, maintaining long weaves and wigs, false nails and eyelashes, and wearing high heels and a lot of makeup. She argues that these postfeminist women both inhabit and subvert

normative understandings of the place of women in African society. Oluwakemi Balogun, also writing about Lagos, explores the beauty queens of Nigeria who, she argues, engaged in beauty diplomacy. She discusses both the opportunities and constraints that beauty diplomacy offers. Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, a historian, writes about the quiet, subtle, everyday actions of women in political movements in 1960s Anglophone Cameroon. She argues that the "progressive but conservative" actions of these women also had a deep impact on society. As spectacularly feminine women, beauty queens or actors in political movements, Africa's women show their agency and redefine what feminism means.

All the pieces in this Special Issue demonstrate the agency of African women. Be it in their other-mothering roles as individuals or in their collective activist endeavours, African women have refused to be beaten down by the pandemic. Across the continent, they have risen to the challenge and, in some cases, led the way in demonstrating how African states should be responding to a crisis such as that which we currently confront. The women who shared their work during the pandemic with us represent a tiny percentage of the thousands of women who worked tirelessly across the continent to improve the lives of their fellow citizens. They are the unsung sheroes of the pandemic whose efforts we duly acknowledge. While this Special Issue sheds light on the immense contributions of these sheroes to our ability as a continent to have survived the pandemic, there are still many issues to resolve. Which of the impacts are short-term and which will be more long term? How will the existing vaccine apartheid shape the nature of the pandemic on the continent? What changes, if any, will we witness in the world economic order as a result of the pandemic? These and many other questions can serve as the subject of future issues on the pandemic in this journal.

## References

Abiru, Fadekemi. (2018). *Africa's Lost Decade: Women and the Structural Adjustment Programme*. The Republic 25 September. Available at https://republic.com.ng/augustseptember-2018/africas-lost-decade/

Adesina, Jimi O. 2015. "Return to a Wider Vision of Social Policy: Rereading Theory and History." *South African Review of Sociology* 46 (3): 99–119.

African Arguments. 2021. *On Food Security & COVID-19*. Available at https://africanarguments.org/category/african-arguments/special-series/on-food-security-covid19/

African Feminism. 2020. *African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement*. Available at https://africanfeminism.com/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/

Azevedo, Mario J. 2017. The State of Health System(s) in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities. *Historical Perspectives on the State of Health and Health Systems in Africa, Volume II: The Modern Era*, 1–73. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32564-4_1

Chen, Martha et al. 2021. "Covid-19 and informal work: Evidence from 11 cities." *International Labour Review*. https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12221

Fosu, Augustin K. 2013. "Impact of the global financial and economic crisis on development: whither Africa?" *Journal of International Development* 25 (8): 1085-1104.

Fosu, Augustin K. 2018. "Economic structure, growth, and evolution of inequality and poverty in Africa: An overview." *Journal of African Economies* 27 (1): 1-9.

IDRC. 2021. "Informing future responses to shocks and pandemics by drawing lessons from COVID-19's impact on food systems." *International Development Research Centre*. Available at https://idrc.ca/en/research-in-action/informing-future-responses-shocks-and-pandemics-drawing-lessons-covid-19s-impact

JDW-Sahel. 2020. *Sahel: Outbreak of GBV Cases Under Covid-19, According to an NGO*. Justice and Dignity of the Women of Sahel. Available at https://jdwsahel.org/2020/08/07/sahel-flambee-de-cas-de-vbg-sous-la-covid-19-selon-une-ong/

Mwai, Peter. "Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?" 2022. BBC 2 February. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46783600

Ocran, Matthew K. and Biekpe, Nicholas. 2007. "Trends and volatility in sub Saharan Africa's key primary commodity exports: economics." *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 10 (1): 116-129.

Paul, Madhumita. 2017. Children's education at extreme risk is 7 African countries: Report. Available at https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/africa/children-s-education-at-extreme-risk-in-7-african-countries-report

Pereira, Charmaine and Tsikata, Dzodzi. 2021. "Extractivism, Resistance, Alternatives." *Feminist Africa* 2 (1): 1–13.

Sarkar, Pia. 2021. "'Vaccine apartheid': Africans tell UN they need vaccines." *AP News*. 24 September. Available at https://apnews.com/article/climate-change-united-nations-general-assembly-united-nations-africa-science--11425d2449903ba448a96b2b0f106a70

Schotte, Simone et al. 2021. "The labour market impact of COVID-19 lockdowns: Evidence

from Ghana." *IZA Discussion Paper No. 14692*. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3917307 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3917307

Sule, Mariam. 2020. "Different agendas, one goal: How Nigerians united to #EndSARS". *ALJAZEERA*. 18 November. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/11/18/different-agendas-one-goal-how-activists-united-to

UNDP. 2020. "Human Development Index (HDI) Ranking." *2020 Human Development Report*. Available at http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking

UNDP. No date. *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*. Available at https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/

World Population Review. 2022. Poorest Countries in the World 2022. Available at https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/poorest-countries-in-the-world

Zounmenou, David. (2020). Third terms for presidents of Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea must be stopped. ISS Today 30 September. Available at https://issafrica.org/iss-today/third-terms-for-presidents-of-cote-divoire-and-guinea-must-be-stopped

# COVID-19 Recovery and Beyond: An African Feminist Vision for Macroeconomic System Change

**Wangari Kinoti and Fatimah Kelleher**

## Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women in Africa and the extent to which government policies designed to respond to the social and economic shocks caused by the pandemic have addressed wider, persistent gender inequalities. We argue that while there have been some laudable policy efforts across the continent, they have not only been largely gender-blind, but have also potentially deepened gender inequalities. We find that although some measures like cash transfers, various forms of tax cuts and public employment schemes may have benefited women, they did not take into account the more systemic and gendered exclusionary factors, such as the ability to access payment infrastructure and digital financial services, household care burdens and division of labour, access to decent paid work and the dynamics of formal versus informal work. Containment measures were implemented without much evidence for mitigation planning around increased unpaid care and domestic workloads or escalations in gender-based violence. We make the case for a rethink of the predominant economic models that have kept Africa in a financial chokehold, severely limiting the ability of governments to deliver on the social and economic rights of their people. Ultimately, we draw on African feminist positions to recommend a set of policy directions that could form the backbone for fundamental system change, which, as this pandemic has shown us, is crucial for the economic health of the continent and the wellbeing of the African people.

## Introduction

By the end of 2021, over 5.6 million people had died from COVID-19 globally (ECDC, 2021). While reported death rates in Africa remain among the lowest from a global continental perspective, the start of 2021 saw a spike in cases and mortality that led to a "second wave" of the pandemic over that year, resulting in a rapid quadrupling of numbers of both the infected and those who succumbed to the virus. As a result, the economic devastation - already disproportionately felt by the African continent - deepened intensely over that year. But even as the real impacts of COVID-19 are expected to be felt most keenly in the years ahead, voices across the continent hold hope that in this devastation lies an opportunity for systemic change. Globally, the pandemic has exposed the inherent inequalities and injustices of the dominant global economic order. Vertical dependencies on global supply chains and inadequate fiscal space to deliver social protection have left citizens facing food deprivation and severe economic precarity as both incomes and savings vanish. And while early calls for a "return to normal" have since been followed with the mantra of "building back better", these platitudes fail to capture the more deeply rooted systemic change needed for a more economically just future.

In this paper, we begin by looking at some of the major impacts of COVID-19 so far, particularly as they are experienced by women on the continent. We then present an analysis of a sample of the policy measures taken by governments - targeted at individuals, households or workers, employers and businesses - in order to illustrate the extent to which they have largely continued to miss the mark when it comes to addressing the gender inequalities that have persisted and, in many cases, been worsened by the pandemic. We also present a brief analysis of the financial realities that African countries are in against the backdrop of a historically deeply problematic global financial architecture that keeps Africa in a debt, austerity and privatisation chokehold and how this continues to influence policy decisions in the COVID-19 era. Finally, after a more in-depth look at the economic realities of women on the continent, we offer a range of alternative policy directions, informed by (Pan) African feminist positions for system change that go beyond the current crisis and encompass a viable rethink of the dominant economic paradigms that were already failing many African citizens even before the coming of COVID-19.

## COVID-19 in Africa: The Impacts so Far

After the start of the pandemic and over the course of 2020, COVID-19 took the lives of 65,000 Africans and infected 2.7 million (ACSS, 2020). At the beginning of 2022, COVID cases on the continent were at over ten million and reported deaths at over 236,000 (ECDC, 2021). Even accounting for significant underreporting across the continent, these figures have placed Africa at far lower morbidity and mortality rates than other parts of the world. While the reasons for this continue to be debated (a younger and more dispersed population being the dominant theory), the continent's position in a globalised world has meant that the social and economic impacts are far more visible and have also arguably been felt disproportionately. The vertical vulnerabilities of Africa's export-oriented economies within the global economy have left the continent facing its first recession in 25 years (World Bank, 2020a). Countries with the greatest dependency on primary resources, in particular, experienced the worst downturns as commodity markets suffered from the multiple lockdown impacts of the decreased movement of goods, depressed demands for manufactured products dependent on those commodities, and a general halt to global production within supply chains (Tröster, 2020). Outflows of capital from emerging markets towards "safe havens" have also followed (Tröster, 2020).

At a human level, these economic impacts are being felt in various ways. The predominance of the informal sector across the continent has led to increased economic precarity as markets have closed in response to the pandemic. Women dominate the informal sector on the continent and there is evidence that globalisation has increased their employment informality rather than decreased it, resulting in increased gendered income disparity (Chimhangwa, 2020). COVID-19 has intensified gendered economic inequalities significantly; in South Africa, for example, rural women who are subsistence farmers and informal traders have experienced severe loss of income and have found themselves relying on loan sharks to sustain their production and households (Parry, 2020). In Kenya and Ghana, a study of young women in urban areas, who are mostly workers in the informal sector, showed significant decreases in income and/or loss of jobs since the onset of the pandemic (Chakma, 2020).

But even women in formal, paid employment have been disproportionately hit, with industries that employ more women being most impacted by the global fallouts of 2020 (UN Women, 2020). The gendered segregation of work that exists across many industries, coupled with unfair working contracts, pay and conditions,

leave women doubly vulnerable in any economic crisis, and COVID-19 has been no different.

While terms like "slow down" and "shut down" have been used to describe the economic realities brought on by the pandemic, the opposite has been true for the care economy and particularly for unpaid care and domestic work, which, in fact, went into overdrive. Although there were major variations in the stringency and length of lockdowns across the continent, even the mildest lockdown measures caused notable disruptions at the household level when it came to care work. This has disproportionately affected women and girls in households. Although it varied from country to country, it is estimated that, before the pandemic, African women were already doing 3.4 times more unpaid care work than men (ILO, 2018). People's confinement at home, school and daycare facility closures, the growing vulnerability and restricted travel of older members of households, increased domestic workloads. Healthcare burdens on households also increased both due to care required for COVID-19 patients and, particularly at the onset of the pandemic, the impact of scaling back on non-COVID-19 related medical and health services. In an August 2020 survey covering young women in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, over 70% reported an increase in their household work during the lockdown period, with 46% spending an extra two to four hours and 31% spending more than four extra hours doing housework every day (ActionAid, 2020). This included cooking (as more family members were home during the lockdown), childcare and home-schooling of children. Physical cut-off from institutional and familial support that followed lockdown restrictions compounded the situation, with services and networks that women in particular are more in need of, such as healthcare, childcare provision and local transportation, being even less accessible than before.

As we moved deeper into 2021, the pandemic's second wave across the continent delivered greater tragedy in terms of mortality and morbidity, compounding the wider impacts. Throughout the year, the toll continued to rise, driven heavily by reporting from the southern region and, in particular, South Africa –both a more susceptible economic hub and also a country with one of the stronger reporting mechanisms on the continent (Al-Jazeera, 2021a). The continent's already fragile health systems were being overwhelmed and, quite simply, could not cope. Although there has been some vaccine uptake across the continent, this remains lacking with many African countries continuing to struggle to source not only the vaccine for all their citizens, but also the medical equipment needed to manage cases and lower

morbidity. As at the end of December 2021, all but one of Africa's 54 nations were rolling out COVID-19 vaccines. Of the almost eight billion doses given globally, only three per cent had been administered in Africa, and only around eight per cent of Africans had been fully vaccinated, compared with more than 60% in many high-income countries (Africa CDC, 2021). Meanwhile, the emergence and continued movement of new variants means that subsequent waves of COVID-19 continue to threaten ( Al-Jazeera, 2021b). Any reinstitution of lockdowns and other restrictions across countries - while harder to uphold as stringently as in the first wave - will continue to devastate an already economically precarious informal sector that most Africans, particularly women, are dependent on. Countries have already been pushed into recession in the wake of the pandemic. Rwanda went into its first economic recession (World Bank, 2020b), attributed in part to its tourism and hospitality industry being hit hard and potentially compromising the great progress made in poverty reduction over the years. Kenya also faced its first recession in 18 years with the hospitality and education sectors being the most affected (Murirui, 2021). World Bank projections heralded Africa's first recession in 25 years (IMF, 2020a).

## Government Policy Responses: Missing the Mark on Gender

Government responses to the social and economic crises flowing from the pandemic have varied across the continent. Policy decisions of this nature continue to take place against the backdrop of a continent already facing multiple crises, with some specific and disproportionate impacts on women as discussed in the next two sections.

As was the case globally, the initial policy measures put in place by governments across the continent were related to containment. Notably, African countries took **containment measures** comparatively early, and in most cases, even before the first index case was recorded (World Health Organisation, 2021). These measures included geographical containment, periods of home confinement, suspension of social, educational and economic activities, and prohibition of mass gatherings. A World Health Organisation (WHO) study of containment strategies in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Senegal illustrates that there were impressive levels of adherence to the measures, while recognising the reality of adherence fatigue creeping in over time (WHO, 2021a). It also makes some reference to the impact of the containment measures on "vulnerable groups" and the mental health toll on the population. However, there is no attention paid to the issues of increased household labour and gender-based violence (GBV) as a result of some of the containment

measures. GBV was a global pandemic long before the onset of COVID-19 and it has been documented that it is even more prevalent during any type of emergency. Before the pandemic, governments were already failing to provide essential services to address GBV and, as described later in this section, they found themselves in a largely ineffective scramble to prevent and respond to rising violence levels when COVID-19 hit. In Kenya, for example, rape and other forms of sexual violence cases increased exponentially in the first two weeks of the current nationwide curfew, constituting 35,38% of all reported crimes (Daily Nation Newspaper , 2020). "Stay-at-home " directives largely do not account for the fact that there are many women, girls and LGBTQI+ people for whom home is not a safe place; with increased confinement and isolation at home comes increased risk of GBV, compounded by the lack of options to leave under a lockdown.

Cash transfers in one form or another was probably the most common policy measure taken as soon as the pandemic hit the continent. Malawi announced a six-month Emergency Cash Transfer Programme (giving US$47 per month to each beneficiary) for 172, 000 households in urban and peri-urban areas and estimated to reach 35% of urban households (ILO, 2021). The government simultaneously announced a "top up" to its existing unconditional Social Cash Transfer Programme. South Africa expanded its social grants programme through an extensive special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress scheme that included an increased child support grant (South African Government, 2022). Kenya introduced an additional KES Ten billion (US$100 million) in cash transfers to the elderly, orphans and "other vulnerable members of the society" over and above the existing US$19 a month scheme (ILO, 2021). Many cash transfer programmes are based on digital transfers made via mobile phones. Depending on context, women can face significant challenges accessing digitised government-to-person (G2P) payments. One is their ability to access payment infrastructure and digital financial services; many women face barriers such as discriminatory requirements for and/or lack of documentation to open required accounts. Additionally, many women will have restricted mobility due to domestic care responsibilities or other cultural structures that limit their access to mobile money agents, particularly in underserved rural communities. There are also gender gaps in mobile phone ownership (13% in Africa south of the Sahara) linked to identification document requirements and affordability (Zimmerman and May, 2021). On top of their disproportionate care and domestic work burden, women are less likely to be in paid work, earn less than men when they are, and are

concentrated in the informal economy, making them most vulnerable to economic exclusion. Social protection programmes that do not take this into account end up widening gender inequalities.

Governments also took various forms of taxation measures targeting individuals, employers and businesses. These measures were widely intended to mitigate income losses for individuals, employers and businesses (primarily by introducing new tax relief parameters and lowering income tax rates) and improve access to basic necessities for households (mostly by reducing consumption taxes). Kenya introduced a 100% tax relief on monthly incomes of US$240 or less. The top income tax rate was also reduced from 30% to 25% and value added tax (VAT) shrunk from 16% to 14%. Corporation tax reduced by five per cent (ILO, 2021). However, these measures were short-lived with Kenya's parliament reversing all but one of them in December 2020, eight months after they were introduced (Obulutsa, 2020). South Africa introduced a tax subsidy to employers of up to ZAR500 per month for private sector employees earning below ZAR6,500 under the Employment Tax Incentive. It also fast-tracked VAT refunds and provided a three-month delay for filing and first payment of carbon tax (IMF, 2021a). Guinea reduced taxes on health and life insurance contracts (IMF, 2021a). Of course, some measures such as decreasing consumption taxes, may result in short term benefits for women, even though they are not deliberately designed to do so. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, introduced a three-month suspension of the collection of VAT on the import and sale of necessities or mass consumption products for a period of three months. This was likely to benefit low-income women who are generally responsible for meeting basic household needs. A similar measure was taken on agricultural products, which would probably benefit 72% of women who work in agriculture (UNDP and UN Women, 2020). On the other hand, gender gaps in employment mean that payroll tax relief will neither apply to nor benefit the majority of women as they are concentrated in the informal sector. The same can be said of tax cuts to insurance policies when most insurance policies are taken out as part of formal employment contracts.

Targeted public employment programmes also featured in the stimulus packages of several countries. Nigeria's Special Public Works in the Rural Areas programme was set up to provide jobs for 774,000 young people through three-month placements paying US$51 a month (Government of Nigeria, 2021). These youth employment schemes have been criticised as not accounting for the high

rates of underemployment, where millions of educated and skilled young people are still without work or under-utilising their skills. These schemes primarily target young people from the lowest economic bracket and with little education. *Kazi Mtaani* is the Kenyan equivalent, this time targeting young people living in informal settlements in an "extended public works project" aimed at utilising labour intensive approaches to create sustainable public goods in the urban development sector (Republic of Kenya, 2017). The jobs target an initial 226,000 young people in and around informal settlements with the aim of improving the environment and service delivery infrastructure, as well as providing income generation opportunities. Although gender-specific information on these two schemes is not publicly available, public employment schemes of this temporary nature have been found to include little effort to take into account women's participation. In many cases, households will select a male family member to participate and women tend to opt not to do so. Other issues include unfriendly work environments and male work norms leading to gender biases in selection. Crucially, many of these schemes do not consider the gender-based division of labour in households and the constraints on women's time and availability in that regard.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is difficult to find COVID-19 data that is disaggregated by sex or gender, including on policy responses across the continent. However, it can be deduced from the limited information available that while there have been some laudable policy efforts across the continent, they have largely been gender-blind. This is not unique to Africa; UNDP and UN Women estimate that only 18% of the global social protection and job response has been"gender sensitive".[1] In fact, 16 countries were reported as not having registered any gender-sensitive measures at all (Mlambo-Ngchuka, 2020). The UNDP-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker defines "gender sensitive" measures as those that seek to address gendered links and challenges, including violence against women and girls, women's economic security and unpaid care work. These would include social protection measures that target women or prioritise them as the main recipients of benefits, labour market measures aimed at improving women's access to paid work, and fiscal and economic measures that channel support to sectors of the economy where women are overrepresented. In addressing unpaid care work, we would see social protection measures that support women and men with care responsibilities or improved services for populations with care needs and labour market measures

1 The authors prefer the term "'gender-responsive".

that help workers with care responsibilities to cope with the rising demand for unpaid care (UNDP, 2021).

At 57%, those measures focused on preventing and responding to violence formed the majority of "gender-sensitive" measures taken on the continent. These ranged from setting up or boosting hotlines, shelters and other GBV services (Mozambique, Angola, South Sudan and others), to fast tracking cases in court (South Africa, Zimbabwe) and measures to improve data collection (Cameroon). Despite WHO advice for governments to declare GBV services essential and an integral part of national and local COVID-19 response plans, by September 2020, only seven countries in the region (Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe) had taken this step (UNDP and UN Women, 2020).

As of the end of September 2020, a total of 45 countries and territories in Africa south of the Sahara had adopted 189 social protection and labour market measures in response to COVID-19, but only 16% of these measures were considered "gender sensitive". Similarly, of the 98 fiscal and economic measures that 31 countries and territories adopted, only 19% were aimed at strengthening women's economic security. Measures to address unpaid care and domestic work featured the least, at only two per cent on the UNDP-UN Women Tracker. These kinds of measures also performed poorly globally at eight per cent, showing that the unpaid labour done at domestic and community level primarily by women, despite coming into unprecedented focus during the pandemic, remained largely absent from policy discussions and decisions in most of the world. Overall, we continue to see a poor effort to design policies that aim to reduce gender inequalities at a time when, more than ever, they are in plain sight.

## Africa in a Global Finance Chokehold: Debt, Austerity and Privatisation

African governments have taken a raft of public policy measures against the backdrop of what was already a dire economic situation for the continent. It is important to note this in charting the path ahead, not only for continental recovery from the impact of the pandemic, but also for a fundamental system change towards building just economies.

In its April 2021 Regional Economic Outlook report for Africa, the IMF classifies 17 countries as either in debt distress or at high risk of distress (IMF, 2021b). Over the period between 2010 and 2018, the average public debt increased from

40% to 59% of GDP, making this region the fastest growing in debt accumulation, far beyond other developing regions. In the same period, public debt as a percentage of GDP had at least doubled in more than a quarter of the countries in the region, among which are Angola, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria (Carneiro and Kouame, 2021). The IMF projected that public debt would increase to 65% of GDP by the end of 2020, with the largest increases being in oil-exporting countries (IMF, 2020b).

When it comes to COVID-19 specific response measures, analysis by the Overseas Development Institute (Raga and Housseini, 2020), shows that as of mid-August 2020, economic stimuli (both fiscal and monetary policy) across 23 countries south of the Sahara amounted to only three per cent of GDP. South Africa's package was highest at ten per cent of GDP (Smith, 2020). In comparison, the amount across the G20 countries was 27percent. This is equivalent to about US$3,900 worth of fiscal and liquidity support for each person in G20 countries, compared with US$52 per person in African countries (UNDP and UN Women, 2020).

Towards the end of January 2021, the IMF cautioned South Africa against its large fiscal deficit and massive debt burden (Zwane, 2021). Its advice on improving the situation was what we had come to expect long before the onset of the pandemic: wage bill containment, avoiding "ill-targeted" subsidies and transfers to state-owned enterprises, creating conditions to increase private investment, redefining the role of the public sector and increasing labour market flexibility (Zwane, 2021). Yet it is widely documented that this advice is what continues to result in the poor delivery of social protection, privatised and commodified public goods and services, and precarious labour conditions described in other sections of this paper that are the major cause of enduring gender inequalities. In Kenya, citizens recently put up a vigorous online protest under the hashtag "#stoploaningKenya", opposing a new US$2,34 billion IMF loan described as support for pandemic response and economic reform (Mwaura, 2021). A petition signed by more than 235,000 people protested this newest loan on the basis that "previous loans to the Kenya government have not been prudently utilised and have often ended up in mega corruption scandals" (Change.org, 2022). Although corruption and misuse of public funds featured most prominently in the campaign, the petition also decried heavy taxation and the high price of basic commodities. In its latest Country Report for Kenya, the IMF continues to advise the broadening of tax nets and the reduction of tax exemptions-including VAT - and restraint in recurrent expenditure, "particularly through a gradual reduction in the wage bill and transfers to public sector entities" (IMF, 2021c).

Many of the COVID response and recovery related actions taken by the international finance and development community fall short of addressing gender inequalities. For example, just eight out of 71 World Bank health emergency response projects approved between April and the end of June 2020 were aiming to eliminate healthcare fees, which are prohibitive in at least 56 of those countries. Out-of-pocket healthcare expenses hit the poor and women the hardest and, prior to the pandemic, pushed 100 million people into poverty every year (ReliefWeb, 2020).

Additionally, we continue to see COVID-19 financial support for countries being mostly in the form of new loans, despite the already vastly unsustainable debt levels on the continent. In April 2020, the G20 announced a plan suspending principal and interest payments on debts for the world's poorest countries due to bilateral government lenders between May and December of that year (University of Toronto, 2020). This Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) would potentially cover 77 countries which would have to make a formal request and make a set of commitments and disclosures on spending, public sector financing and borrowing. However, analysis by groups such as the European Network on Debt and Development shows that the G20 DSSI does not meet the scale of the debt problem in the Global South and calls for a much more ambitious approach, ranging from scaling up the DSSI to substantial debt relief, restructuring and cancellation (Iolanda, 2020).

There is also a possibility that the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) system could be directed towards funding a Liquidity and Sustainability Facility (LSF). SDRs are a unit added to the reserves of IMF member countries to increase their liquidity; they were last created following the 2009 financial crisis and are about to be created again in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the UK set to receive approximately US$27 billion. However, while increasing the vulnerability of African countries to foreign currency debt, concerns regarding the characteristics of the LSF undermining fiscal space and monetary policy autonomy cannot be ignored by governments, despite the COVID-19 recovery pressures they now face (Gabor and Simeoni, 2021). Ultimately, the longer-term consequences of these risks could constrain the development needs of national economies in the long run.

For Africa, this reality of widening inequality while in the pursuit of economic growth is rooted in the IMF and World Bank-imposed structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, where public sector cut-backs, deregulation, and privatisation crippled the strong state-building necessary to manage and implement progressive macroeconomic policy. For women, the SAPs

had impacts across the continent, with agricultural commercialisation pushing them further down the rural hierarchy, welfare provisioning being slashed or terminated, and cuts to state-provided health and education not only compounding patriarchal norms that deny women access to those services, but also leading to a huge reduction in women's formal avenues for secure wage earning in those same sectors (Abiru, 2018). Under the framework of the Washington Consensus, these policies have continued into the 21st century through de-industrialisation, a focus on export rather than domestic markets, import dependency and a suppression of the role of the state while promoting market-driven growth.

The latest and most blatant illustration of the life-threatening injustices that result from a neocolonial and neoliberal global governance and economic model is the gross inequity in access to COVID-19 vaccines between rich and poor countries. As the vaccine was being finalised for roll-out in November 2020, just over half (51%) of all available doses had been reserved through premarket purchase commitments for high income countries. These countries represent only 14% of the world's population (So, 2020). They include the United States, which reserved 800 million doses; Australia and Canada that collectively reserved one billion doses despite accounting for under one per cent of the global COVID-19 cases (So, 2020); and Japan. In what has been described as a "catastrophic moral failure" whose price will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world's poorest countries, (WHO, 2021b), some countries and companies continue to bypass multilateral initiatives such as COVID-19 Global Vaccine Access to cut bilateral deals. In the meantime, a waiver on certain aspects of the trade regime for intellectual property rights (TRIPS) agreement that would allow up-scaled and more localised production of the vaccine remains contested at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), following a rejection of the proposal in March 2021 by predominantly global northern countries whose access to the vaccine has already been secured.

The trade-related inequality at the heart of this vaccine apartheid throws further light on the issue of trade more broadly within the continent, both in terms of trading relationships between African countries and the rest of the world, and more imminently in relation to intra-continental trade. Currently the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) has become the biggest economic project on the continent, promising economic development. It is also being touted as a key towards recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, but there are serious concerns about the neoliberal model that the AfCFTA is based on, which need to

be interrogated. African feminist analysis of the AfCFTA has already assessed the problematic nature of the current model, which not only threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities between African nations as it creates winners and losers, but could also potentially be of greater benefit to extra-continental actors in the longer term (Kelleher, 2021). For women, the impacts of trade liberalisation – even as a continental initiative – could also be catastrophic, from the further dislodging of women's rural sovereignty under an accelerated AfCFTA-supported agro-industrial paradigm, to the proliferation of jobs that exploit women's low-waged labour in pursuit of comparative advantage (Kelleher, 2021). With privatisation of services also an implicit aspect of liberalisation, the AfCFTA's rapid tariff liberalisation schedule will potentially further undermine the fiscal policy space of African governments to deliver on equitable universal public services in the longer term.

## Existing Economic Realities and the Impacts on Women

In the area of unpaid care, the care economy and social reproduction, African women provide care to households and the economy predominantly through invisibilised, unpaid care and domestic labour, as well as migrant and public sector jobs that are precarious, badly paid and without labour protections. As a result, women carry a disproportionate amount of the physical, emotional, sexual and intellectual labour needed in homes, communities, markets and the global economy. Within many African contexts, the unpaid family labour both urban and rural women put into production is the foundation of their nations' overall economic reproduction. In a rapidly urbanising continent, the agricultural and subsistence production that characterises the continent is just one aspect of an increasingly diversifying landscape of women's labour.

Where universal access to public services and social infrastructure is concerned, the hollowing out of the role of the state following the introduction of the SAPs has led to a gradual commodification of rights via privatisation, increasingly in the form of public private partnerships. This has created a hierarchy of access. However, privatisation of subsidised and free public goods and services has not reduced government deficits any more than it has "crowded in'' private investment for services which by their nature cannot and should not generate profit. Often more dependent on public services and infrastructure due to gendered roles in society, African women have carried the brunt of a lack of provision and growing inequities in access as these services have become increasingly commodified and

at the mercy of market vagaries. Beyond the right to education and health, critical public services such as water, electricity, transportation, public childcare and elder care services are all essential to reducing women's unpaid care responsibilities in their homes and communities.

As the pandemic continues to move across the world, the issue of vaccine equity has highlighted once again the importance not only of ensuring access to the COVID-19 vaccines, but of combating patent protections and intellectual project injustices more broadly. Halting the devastation of the disease itself remains the first imperative for African governments. Without a successful vaccination programme conducted in parallel with the rest of the world, the Africa Centre for Disease Control warns that COVID-19 could become an endemic disease in Africa, creating opportunities for the virus to mutate further. However, even as this paper is being written, the EU and other wealthier countries continue to hold back support from the TRIPS waiver so desperately needed at the WTO to ensure Africans can access the vaccine. This dependency has stemmed from the stark reality that all African countries are net importers of medical and pharmaceutical products, importing almost 100% of their pharmaceuticals. This reality exists alongside an increasingly accepted commodified approach to healthcare in Africa that has been compounded by the culling of state healthcare provision during the SAPs. Along with the incursion of private finance and a growing culture of health insurance penetration through increased financialisation, the continent also has the legacy of fighting for access to lifesaving medicines on the global stage in the face of inhumane intellectual property protections for multinational corporations within WTO trade agreements; the case of antiretroviral drugs in the earlier part of the 21st century remains an ever-present shadow of Africa's immense vulnerability within the economic order.

For the large numbers of women working in the informal economy, although the central role of informal economies is widely acknowledged, it continues to be treated as "adjacent" - a policy approach prejudiced by the fact that it is largely driven by women's labour. However, African economies are largely predicated on this invisibilised work, a reality that disrupts the fallacy that the informal economy is marginal while it is how many households earn their livelihoods. Policy interventions concerning them tend to focus on regulatory measures such as licensing and taxation. Little attention is paid to the rights of workers in the informal economy and African feminists have argued that this is largely driven by both the invisibilisation and undervaluing of women's labour.

The growth of the gig economy is also an area that policy makers will increasingly need to legislate for in the coming years. While, on the one hand, there is the potential for new opportunities for women's work, the gig economy itself could also lead to a "formalisation of informality" if the right protections are not put into place to protect workers – including women – with decent work standards in terms of contracts and remuneration (Kelleher, 2020). As with every other form of work, this will ultimately come down to who owns the means of production as the digital economy mushrooms, a reality currently riven with a gendered digital divide and other intersectional inequalities.

Austerity, debt and tax deficits have been at the heart of Africa's developmental barriers for decades and, even as the COVID-19 pandemic started to impact the continent in 2020, the continent was still dealing with the fallout of the financial crisis from a decade ago which led to austerity measures prescribed by the global financial architecture and international finance institutions that run it. Debt burdens were already high and have now reached critical levels. Meanwhile, acknowledged tax deficits on the continent remain unaddressed and indeed continue to be exacerbated within economic systems now heavily reliant on the solicitation of Foreign Direct Investment, often with promises of tax breaks alongside minimal private sector regulation. While debt in and of itself is not necessarily the problem, the conditionalities that come with it and decrease fiscal policy space and challenge monetary autonomy (and the ability to make sovereign decisions on needed public investments) are.

Agriculture, livelihoods, food and ecosystems remain major factors within Africa's economic policy trajectory. However, the colonial legacy of resource extraction continues to dominate the continent's agrarian model, impacting food systems, livelihoods and ecosystems. An export-oriented trade policy, continued dominance of primary commodities and the importation of finished products have kept the continent in a neocolonial vertical dependency on the Global North. Newer actors like China have simply benefited from this already unjust structure. Meanwhile, Africa's agricultural development paradigm remains dominated by agro-commercial interests that are continuing to proliferate cash and monocropping across the continent, displacement from land by multinational corporations, decreases in crop biodiversity and a dependence on commodified inputs and food price fluctuations caused by market vagaries.

In the area of trade justice, wholesale trade liberalisation and export-oriented models have not facilitated economic diversification and industrialisation or brought in long term sustainable foreign direct investments. Although liberalisation has in some contexts led to an increase in employment opportunities for women – particularly in export-oriented sectors such as textiles and horticulture – the unemployment that often results from the restructuring of labour markets disproportionately impacts women more than men and continuously remains unaddressed, plunging women into economic hardship. Liberalisation of imports also has gendered consequences, with the influx of goods and services (including legalised dumping) often leaving women traders unable to compete. Competition has also led to low wage jobs, poor working conditions and, in some cases, greater informality as market fluctuations require even greater labour flexibility, with women constituting a significant percentage of such workers.

Finally, although the commitment to human rights as a cross-cutting imperative remains an unrealised goal across the continent, it is needed to underpin and uphold any successes in each of the economic areas already discussed. Human rights and their fundamental principles, including those of universality, inalienability, interdependence, indivisibility, equality, non-discrimination, non-derogation and accountability, must guide all actions taken in response to COVID-19. Recognising multiple and intersecting discriminations (such as those based on sex, age, race, ethnicity, economic status, geographic status, religion, migration status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics and others), is a prerequisite for the kind of just societies that a post-COVID-19 future should seek in order to "build back better".

## COVID-19 as Catalyst for Economic System Change? An African Feminist Vision

Theo Sowa, a women's rights and social justice activist who until recently was the Chief Executive Officer of the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) captures the African feminist vision succinctly in her words: *'When people say 'build back better' I hope we are going to say 'build better', because the 'back' wasn't good for most of us.'* (as cited in Van der Gaag, 2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a much-needed global critical focus on orthodox economic models; but even prior to it, the flaws of GDP growth-focused development were visible in the face of deepening structural inequality. In 2015,

global income inequality had been at its highest level for the past half century (OECD, 2015), while in Africa the richest 0,0001% owned 40% of the continent's wealth (Seery *et al.*, 2019). Assumptions around trickled-down growth, automatic gains through market liberalisation, the "efficiency" of privatisation and the "benefits" of minimal state intervention and deregulation were already proving baseless.

African feminist economic propositions see the COVID-19 pandemic's global impact as an opportunity for African countries to "rethink" these dominant models. The harm already done to the resilience of African economies through the acceptance of conditionalities that enforced austerity policies need to be acknowledged, and alternatives that ensure that those same harmful conditionalities are not accepted once again, even while pursuing COVID-19 recovery, need to be developed (Pheko, 2020). By placing and defending the need for gender justice at the heart of our economies, African feminists argue that governments would be in a significantly better position to reject the current injustices of neoliberal capitalism (Kinoti, 2019).

Feminist policy analysis highlights the inherent inequities embedded in this neoliberal paradigm, with a focus on how gendered and other economic inequalities deepen on the back of these models globally: from the disproportionate impact of water privatisation on the poorest women (Fall, 2011) to their exploitation as low wage labourers and the undermining of labour standards in global value chains (Beneria, 2011). Such critical analysis ultimately challenges the GDP-growth driven trajectory of the last 20 years as this has been accompanied by pervasive unemployment and reduced public spending that has left millions without basic services such as healthcare. Increased privatisation has compromised equitable access to public goods and services such as water and electricity by commodifying them (African Feminism, 2020). Feminists also challenge the extractive and neo-colonial nature of neoliberal capitalism by global northern corporations and their host governments and expose the harm this has wrought on African lives and the continent's economic and ecological sovereignty (Mapondera et al., 2020). Feminist analysis has also consistently centred the unrecognised role of women's informal labour and unpaid care and domestic work – core gendered labour that the extractive capitalist system relies upon to reproduce itself.

As the impacts of COVID-19 continue to unfold, these critiques are accompanied by the proposition of viable alternatives that comprise an African feminist vision to the dominant neoliberal model. Feminist propositions offer more economically just alternatives that are "not just for Africa's women, but indeed for

all those who are not part of the global capitalist elite" (Mama and Abbas, 2015). At their core, these propositions include placing the lives and wellbeing of Africans at the centre of the economy and the economy in the service of those lives, as opposed to African lives simply in the service of the economy. Going beyond the narrow measures of GDP growth, African macroeconomic policymaking needs a post-growth vision that - even while acknowledging the need for increased production within our economies - ensures that human wellbeing and respect for our ecological endowments and planetary boundaries always come first.

## Conclusions and New Policy Directions: An Alternative Roadmap for Macroeconomic Decision-Making

African feminist propositions understand that most countries remain wedded to the now orthodox economic trajectory of market-driven growth as a result of the globalised economic influences wielded by powerful international institutions and bilateral aid relationships with wealthier nations. The challenges of attempting alternative macroeconomic strategies in the era of rapidly moving capital flows and the pressure this puts on policy-making cannot be dismissed (Ghosh, 2010). But despite a hegemonic framing of neoliberal policies as the apolitical and "common sense" option for developing countries to follow, African policy makers must remember that macroeconomic policies are never politically neutral nor irreversible, and are therefore always open to reform, especially when they are clearly failing (Kelleher, 2020).

Indeed, neoliberal capitalism in itself has been a major shift away from the early post-independence gains by African leaders who sought to remove the extractive political and economic relationships that had defined the continent's colonial history. Firstly, it was understood that only genuine economic independence could bring about sustainable and social development on the continent, as clearly argued by Kwame Nkrumah (Nkrumah, 1963). Before his assassination, Amílcar Cabral had successfully begun to create an economy based on state-owned enterprises and cooperatives (Jacobin, 2019). A refusal to imitate foreign models of capitalist development or to submit to foreign dictates also underpinned the thinking of Thomas Sankara, who saw use of the State as an instrument for economic and social transformation, and rejected the neo-coloniality of foreign debt (Dembele, 2013; Jaganarth, 2015). These principles, along with many others from the decolonisation era, are inherently aligned with the anti-imperialist positioning that underpin African

feminism (Organisation of African Unity, no date). These can be seen in examples such as the Association of African Women for Research and Development, established in 1977, placing a focus on gender equity alongside a critique of Western-driven development discourses that could undermine the policy sovereignty of African states (Tsikata, 2012). These and more offer lessons for a return to the solidarity politics of Pan-Africanism needed to reimagine our societies for a post-COVID-19 future (Regions Refocus, 2020).

Shocks resulting in economic crisis can act as catalytic moments for reimagining societies, even as they bring about seismic change. Whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic shock it has wrought in Africa offers an opportunity for change will be based partly on the strength of societal push towards systemic changes at national and continental levels. Evidence shows that social movements and collective power have been at the heart of some of the most meaningful shifts in human rights over the years (Horn, 2013) and, in this vein, African feminist thought challenging the extractive nature of neoliberal economics and its impacts on the continent is also an opportunity to harness that power. Women's movements and civil society more broadly need to shift their focus of activism to the wider economic systems sphere, to be familiar and cognisant with the core macroeconomic areas in need of action, and to form coalitions within countries and across the continent on the issues. Much of this work has already started, with several feminist and pan-African organisations and think tanks already active in these areas. At the country level, coalitions such as the Malawi Feminist Macroeconomics Alliance offer a model for national organising that others can look towards.

An alternative roadmap for macroeconomic decision-making in Africa has been needed for decades. Such a roadmap has the following primary objective: to deliver economically just African societies that dislodge structural inequalities and bring about economic system change that places the wellbeing of the African people and environment above the needs of capital accumulation. This will not only require a reframing of our economic policies, but also a reconceptualisation of our current values for what constitutes economic development. Growth alone is not only insufficient but, in the longer term, also destructive to people and the planet.

The following recommended policy directions draw on and further develop from a collation of existing policy recommendations developed by African and other feminist collectives or/and coalitions that have emerged in response to the COVID-19 global crisis. These propositions are offered as a roadmap at the continental level

and acknowledge the very diverse conditions that our countries are operating within - from collapsed states and war zones to stable and well-established economies. Nonetheless, they are offered as the visionary propositions needed for the continent and as part of a call to political and economic solidarity within and between nations on these issues.

## Recommendations

### Unpaid Labour, the Care Economy and Social Reproduction

Countries need to develop a system-wide approach to the care economy by investing in care infrastructure, such as access to water and electricity, along with care facilities and institutions - including for the young and elderly - and ensuring decent work conditions for all workers across the care sectors - education, health, child and elderly care, wider social and community services, domestic work, public transport, housing, water and sanitation. To liberate women from inequitable and unsustainable unpaid care work burdens, governments must ensure quality, accessible and universal public services and universal social protection.

### Universal Access to Public Services and Social Infrastructure

Governments must ensure basic universal access to land, water, food, healthcare (including sexual and reproductive health), transport, education, housing, electricity and information technologies. Crucially, these must include essential services to prevent and respond to GBV. This will require reclaiming and protecting the fiscal space needed for budgetary investments in social protections, including quality and accessible services for all populations. The increasing move towards public private partnerships for delivery of essential services such as water, healthcare and education must be reversed; efficiency gains in this approach remain unproven and, in many cases, questionable, while the presence of private sector compromises access to these services in the pursuit of shareholder bottom lines.

### Vaccine Equity: Ensuring Access to the Covid-19 Vaccine and Combating Patent Protections and Intellectual Property Injustices for the Future

Underpinning vaccine equity is the importance of ensuring that all citizens have access regardless of gender and/or other marginalising factors; and this is a

commitment that needs to be made at national, regional and global levels. As the battle for access to COVID-19 vaccines continues to rage with African lives precariously at the precipice, the time for African governments to find a clear and unequivocal space of solidarity around universal access to vaccines, medicines and related knowledge is undoubtedly now. The recent appointment of an African woman as the Director General of the WTO, along with increasing calls for an overall reform of the WTO, present an opportunity to challenge the TRIPS hegemony, more specifically within this COVID-19 context, but also more broadly where access to medicines is concerned, so that African lives can no longer be held to ransom by powerful pharmaceutical corporations, as they were previously in the case of access to antiretroviral drugs during the AIDS pandemic. To this end, African governments also need to commit to increased budget lines within pharmaceutical research and development domestically so they can shift from being net importers of medicines and vaccines.

## Workers in the Informal Economy

To begin with, countries need to make a clear commitment towards ending the marginalisation and, in some cases, criminalisation of informal workers, and instead acknowledge, promote and value their critical roles in the economy. More specifically, there needs to be a focus on policy prescriptions that work towards ensuring a dignified wage across the economy, along with safety protections within working spaces, including the market spaces where many women engage both directly and indirectly with the economy. The process of introducing formal social protection policies for women informal workers – including income support, statutory leave payments, and tax incentives - particularly for women own-account workers who maintain the continent's value chains and market spaces, is long overdue. As governments seek to expand domestic and regional value chains through enhanced intra-continental trade, any attempts to include women in these must go beyond the rhetoric of market access opportunities and seek to mitigate the realities of increased exploitation, gendered segregation of labour, and economic vulnerability to unrestricted market forces. Social protection systems need to be expanded to include the informal sector such as micro entrepreneurs and self-employed people, especially the most precarious in domestic, care and services work (such as sex workers), in order to ensure that all people have access to a universal basic income, paid leave, food and caregiving services.

## Austerity, Debt and Tax Deficits

The COVID-19 crisis has made the call for debt cancellation even greater, and this is a position that African governments should organise around from a clear position of unity and solidarity. Debt cancellation is a minimal condition for rebalancing the imperialist system of wealth accumulation. In the same vein as Pan-African solidarity, the opportunity to collectively push for a rejection of the conditionalities surrounding financial assistance that impact on the ability of the states to deploy socially responsive policy and/or refuse increased privatisation of key services is now here. If countries like Bolivia and Costa Rica can do so as individual nations, African nations as a genuinely unified body must also find the courage to do so. Progressive tax policies that target multinational corporations in particular must now also be prioritised for economic recovery through revenue raising, decreasing external debt reliance, and post-COVID-19 fiscal planning.

## Agriculture, Livelihoods, Food and Ecosystems

In the first instance, African countries need to critically review the current commitment to Green Revolution theology as a basis for agricultural policy; globally it has not solved hunger by providing sustainable food security. It has been proven to also exacerbate smallholder farmer marginalisation and impoverishment. Instead, governments should start the process of divesting from industrialised and commercialised agriculture and invest in agroecology along the lines recommended by the Food and Agriculture Organisation. Apart from investing in agroecological research and development and other alternative systems, this will involve bolstering local food supply chains by direct support to smallholder farmers and community-driven market paradigms that are more likely to respect the sustainable use of agricultural diversity to benefit those who are both the custodians of and dependants on natural resources for their livelihoods.

## Trade Justice

African policy makers must rethink the current models of rapid and expansive trade liberalisation, not only in terms of external regional and bilateral agreements with non-African nations, but also in terms of internal regional integration projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA). In relation to non-continental agreements, the detrimental impacts of open borders on African economies through a continued extractive relationship is clear; from a concretisation

of national dependencies on primary commodities for export to the continued reliance on costly imports. Internally, the AfCFTA needs far greater review, understanding and constructive critique than has so far been exhibited by policy makers and other stakeholders; the rapidity of its liberalisation timeframe has dangerous implications for the kinds of adjustment costs that will be needed if African lives are not to be destabilised, particularly following diminished national capacity in the wake of COVID-19. While African feminist positions call for a complete rethink of the AfCFTA, as a bare minimum, African policy makers must insist that rigorous social and human rights impact assessments be conducted to inform effective policies that may actually mitigate some of the economic disruptions that many Africans will face if the agreement is implemented within the planned time frame.

### Commitment to Human Rights as a Cross-Cutting Imperative

Policy and budgetary interventions to address the rights of those marginalised by the current economic system (including by those policies that uphold the status quo) must be prioritised. Information and prior consent for large scale policy processes, including negotiations on the world stage and therefore outside of national parameters, must be central to this.

## References

Abiru, Fadekemi. 2018. "Africa's Lost Decade: Women and the Structural Adjustment Programme." *The Republic,* 25 September. Available at https://www.republic.com.ng/augustseptember-2018/africas-lost-decade/.

Action Aid. 2020. "Impact of Covid 19 on Young Women: A Rapid Assessment of 14 Urban Areas in India, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa." Available at https://actionaid.org/publications/2020/impact-covid-19-young-women#downloads.

Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. 2020. "Analysing Africa's Second Wave." Relief Web. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/africacenter.org-Analyzing%20Africas%20Second%20Wave%20of%20COVID-19.pdf.

Africa Centres for Disease Control. 2021. "Key Lessons from Africa's COVID-19 Vaccine Roll Out." Available at https://www.afro.who.int/news/

key-lessons-africas-covid-19-vaccine-rollout.

African Feminism. 2020. "African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement." Available at https://africanfeminism.com/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/

Al Jazeera. 2021a. "Africa COVID deaths pass 100,000 amid second wave." Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/19/africa-covid-deaths-surpass-100000-amid-second-wave.

Al Jazeera. 2021b. "South Africa faces third Covid wave, returns to stricter lockdown" 30 May. Article available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/30/south-africa-faces-third-covid-wave-returns-to-stricter-lockdown.

Beneria, Lourdes. 2011. "Globalisation, Labor, and Women's Work: Critical Challenges for a Post Neoliberal World" in Elson, D and Jain, D, eds *Harvesting Feminist Knowledge for Public Policy: Rebuilding Progress*. International Development Research Centre, Sage Publications.

Carneiro, Francisco and Kouame, Wilfried. 2021. *How much should Sub-Saharan countries adjust in order to curb the increase in public debt? World Bank*. Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/how-much-should-sub-saharan-african-countries-adjust-curb-increase-public-debt.

Chakma, Trimita. 2020. *Impact of COVID-19 on young women: a rapid assessment of 14 urban areas in India, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa. ActionAid*. Available at https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/YUW%20final%20report.pdf.

Change.org. 2022. https://www.change.org/p/imf-executive-board-petition-to-the-imf-to-cancel-the-ksh255-billion-loan-to-kenya.

Chimhangwa, Kudzai. 2020. *How globalisation has impacted African womens' lives,* Opendemocracy. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/how-globalisation-has-informalized-african-womens-lives/.

Daily Nation. 2020. "Women Urge State to Prioritise GBV in Covid-19 Response." DN, 9 December. Available at: https://nation.africa/kenya/gender/5362750-5536046-view-asAMP-jex9r2/index.html

Dembele, Demba M. 2013. *Thomas Sankara: an endogenous approach to development*. Pambazuka News. 23 October. Available at https://www.pambazuka.org/pan-africanism/thomas-sankara-endogenous-approach-development.

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). 2021. "*COVID-19*

*situation update, as of week 20. Updated 27 May.* Available at https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases

Fall, Yassine. 2011. "The Cost of Commoditisation of Food and Water for Women", in Elson, D. and Jain, D., eds. *Harvesting Feminist Knowledge for Public Policy: Rebuilding Progress*, International Development Research Centre, Sage Publications.

FEMNET, 2022. *African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement*. Available at https://africanfeminism.com/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/

Fresnillo, Iolanda. 2020. "Shadow report on the limitations of the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative: Draining out the Titanic with a bucket?" EURODAD, Belgium. Available at https://www.eurodad.org/g20_dssi_shadow_report

Gabor, Daniela and Simeoni, Crystal. 2021. "Time to tap SDRs to boost African bond liquidity?" *Financial Times*, 12 March. Available at https://www.ft.com/content/d1751724-e66b-4b00-96f1-6b13e7257e78.

Ghosh, Jayati. 2010. "Gender-sensitive Macroeconomics and Reshaping Economic Development in the Context of the Crisis." in Wichterich, Christa (Ed.). *In Search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India*. WIDE.

Government of Nigeria. 2021. *Nigeria Special Works Programme*. Available at https://specialpublicworks.gov.ng/site/.

Horn, Jessica. 2013. *Gender and Social Movements, Overview Report*. BRIDGE, Institute of Development studies. Brighton. UK. Available at https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/10898/Gender%20and%20social%20movements%20overview%20report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

International Labour Organisation (ILO). 2018. "ILO calls for urgent action to prevent looming global care crisis." Press Release 28 June. Available at https://www.ilo.org/africa/media-centre/pr/WCMS_633460/lang--en/index.htm

International Labour Organisation (ILO). 2021. *COVID-19 and the World of Work: Country Policy Responses*, ILO, Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/regional-country/country-responses/lang--en/index.htm#MW

International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2020b. "Regional Outlook

– Sub-Saharan Africa, A difficult road ahead." October 2020, Available at https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2020/10/22/regional-economic-outlook-sub-saharan-africa.

International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2020a. *Transcript of October 2020 World Economic Outlook Press Briefing. Available at* https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/10/13/tr101320-transcript-of-october-2020-world-economic-outlook-press-briefing.

International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2021c. IMF Country Report No 21/72, Kenya. April 2021

International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2021a. *Policy Responses to COVID-19: Policy Tracker.* Available at https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#G

International Monetary Fund (IMF). 2021b. *Regional economic outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa*. April. Available at https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2021/04/15/regional-economic-outlook-for-sub-saharan-africa-april-2021.

JACOBIN. 2019. *The Socialist Agronomist Who Helped End Portuguese Colonialism: An Interview with Peter Karibe Mendy,* JACOBIN, 17 October. Available at https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/10/amilcar-cabral-portuguese-colonialism-biography.

Jaganarth, Vashna. 2015. *Why what Sankara had to say about sovereignty still resonates*, *The Conversation*, 22 July. Available at https://theconversation.com/why-what-sankara-had-to-say-about-sovereignty-still-resonates-44864.

Kelleher, Fatimah. 2020. "African feminist futures: macroeconomic pathways." *Bread and Butter Series No. 4*, *African Women's Development Fund (AWDF)*. Available at https://awdf.org/wp-content/uploads/African-Feminist-Futures_-Macroeconomic-Pathways.pdf.

Kelleher, Fatimah. 2021. "The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Women: a Pan African Feminist Analysis." FEMNET. Available at https://femnet.org/2021/04/the-african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-and-women-a-pan-african-feminist-analysis/.

Kinoti, Wangara. 2019. *It's time to put gender justice at the heart of our economies.* Open Democracy, 26 September. Available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/its-time-put-gender-justice-heart-our-economies/

Mama, Amina and Abbas, Hakima. 2015. "Editorial, Feminism and pan-Africanism." *Feminist Africa* 20. Available at http://www.agi.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/429/feminist_africa_journals/archive/20/fa20_web-_entire_journal.pdf.

Mapondera, Margaret et al. 2020. "If Another World is Possible, Who is doing the Imagining? Building an Ecofeminist Development Alternative in a Time of Deep Systemic Crisis", *Bread and Butter Series No. 6*. African Women's Development Fund. Available at https://awdf.africlub.net/wp-content/uploads/If-another-world-is-possible.pdf.

Mlambo-Ngcuka, Phumzile. 2020. *Addressing the economic fallout of COVID-19: pathways and policy options for a gender responsive recovery* UNWomen, 23 November. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/11/op-ed-ed-phumzile-addressing-the-economic-fallout-of-covid-19.

Murirui, Kepha. 2021. *Kenya's economy slumped into recession after 18 years in December.* Citizen Digital, 28 January. Available at https://citizen.digital/business/kenyas-economy-slumped-into-recession-after-18-years-in-september-5068864/.

Mwaura, Waihiga. 2021. Letter from Kenya: Kenyans protest over growing debt. *BBC*, 8 April. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56651735.

Nkrumah, Kwame. 1963. *Nkrumah, Kwame 1963 Africa must unite*, London, Panaf Books.

Obulutsa, George. 2020. *Kenyan parliament halts COVID-19 related tax relief.* Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-kenya-economy-idUSL8N2J12LX

OECD. 2015. *In it Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All.* OECD Publishing, Paris Available at https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/in-it-together-why-less-inequality-benefits-all_9789264235120-en#page1.

Organisation of African Unity. No date. "Lagos plan of action for the economic development of Africa 1980-2000." Ethiopia. Available at https://www.merit.unu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Lagos-Plan-of-Action.pdf.

Parry, Bianca R. and Gordon, Errolyn. 2020. "The shadow pandemic: inequitable social impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa." *Gender, Work and Organisation*. Available at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12565.

Pheko, Lebohang L. 2020. *The Real Pandemic*. Africa is a Country. 6 May. Available at: https://africasacountry.com/2020/05/the-real-pandemic

Raga, Sherillyn and Housseini, Bouba. 2020. *The evolving fiscal and liquidity stimulus packages in response to COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Brief, SET ODI. Available at https://set.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-evolving-fiscal-and-liquidity-stimulus-packages-in-response-to-COVID-19-in-Sub-Saharan-Africa.pdf.

Regions Refocus. 2020. *Lessons from the Decolonisation Era in Confronting the COVID-19 Crisis*. Webinar by members on Post-Colonialisms Today, discussing the impacts of COVID-19. 29 July. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbbuwVUHgBo

ReliefWeb. 2020. "Over 80 percent of IMF COVID loans will push austerity on poor countries." 12 October. Available at Over 80 per cent of IMF Covid-19 loans will push austerity on poor countries - World | ReliefWeb.

Republic of Kenya. 2017. *Kazi Mtaan.*, Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development. Available at https://housingandurban.go.ke/national-hygiene-programme-kazi-mtaani/.

Seery, Emma et al. 2019. *A tale of two continents: fighting inequality in Africa*. Oxfam International. Available at https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-tale-of-two-continents-fighting-inequality-africa-030919-en.pdf.

Smith, Elliot. 2020. *South Africa unleashes largest ever spending plan, but adds to debt worries*. CNBC, 23 April. Available at https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/23/south-africa-unleashes-largest-ever-spending-plan-to-tackle-coronavirus.html.

So, Anthony. 2020. "Reserving coronavirus disease 2019 vaccines for global access: cross sectional analysis." *BMJ:* 371. Available at https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4750.

South African Government. 2022. *Social Grants – Coronavirus COVID-19*. Available at https://www.gov.za/covid-19/individuals-and-households/social-grants-coronavirus-covid-19#.

Tröster, Bernhard and Küblböck, Karin. 2020. "Unprecedented but not Unpredictable*:* Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on commodity dependent countries." *Eur J Dev Res* 32: 1430–1449. Available at https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-020-00313-9.

Tsikata, Dzodzi. 2012. "Development Alternatives for a Post-Crisis World: An African perspective." *Development* 55: 497–502. Available at https://doi.org/10.1057/dev.2012.68

UNDP. 2021. *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*. Available at https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/.

UNDP and UN Women. 2020. *COVID- 19 Global Gender Response Tracker. Regional Fact Sheet: Sub Saharan Africa*. September. Available at https://www.undp.org/publications/covid-19-global-gender-response-tracker-fact-sheets.

University of Toronto. 2020. G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting. *Communique*, 15 April. Available at http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2020/2020-g20-finance-0415.html.

UN Women. 2020. *COVID-19 and its economic toll on women: the story behind the numbers*. 16 September. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women.

Van der Gaag, Nikki. 2021. Imagining the world anew: gender equality and women's rights -Part 2, FP2P. Available at https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/imagining-the-world-anew-gender-equality-and-womens-rights-part-2/.

World Bank. 2020a. "World Bank confirms economic downturn in sub-Saharan Africa." Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/08/world-bank-confirms-economic-downturn-in-sub-saharan-africa-outlines-key-polices-needed-for-recovery.

World Bank. 2020b. "COVID-19 Pushes Rwanda into Recession: Severely Impacts Human Capital." 18 February. Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/02/08/covid-19-pandemic-pushes-rwanda-into-recession-severely-impacts-human-capital.

World Health Organisation (WHO). 2021a. "Containment Strategies: Lessons from Early COVID-19 Responses in Five African Countries. Available at https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/350527/9789290234593-eng.pdf?sequence=1.

World Health Organisation (WHO). 2021b. "WHO Director General's Opening Remarks at 148th Session of the Executive Board." 18 January. Available at https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-148th-session-of-the-executive-board.

Zimmerman, Jamie and May, Maria. 2021. *Digital Cash Transfers in the time of COVID-19: Opportunities and Considerations for Women's Inclusion*

*and Empowerment*. Available at https://www.ictworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Digital-Cash-Transfers-COVID-19-Womens-Inclusion.pdf.

Zwane, Thulethu. 2021. *The IMF warns SA against its massive debt and large fiscal deficit. News 24, 28 January*. Available at https://www.news24.com/citypress/business/the-imf-warns-sa-against-its-massive-debt-and-large-fiscal-deficit-20210128.

# Negotiating Spaces, Exercising Agency and Managing Multiple Roles: The Lived Experiences of University of Ghana Women Academics under COVID-19

**Mjiba Frehiwot, Deborah Atobrah and Irene Appeaning-Addo**

## Abstract

This article interrogates the lived experiences of women academics at the University of Ghana (UG) between March 2020 and March 2021. It highlights their emotions and care decisions as they navigated through the multiple spheres of their lives – physical, emotional, and financial – while meeting the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It further interrogates the innovative ways female academics handled the state and UG's responses to COVID-19 protocols while endeavouring to meet their career responsibilities amidst an increased familial, institutional, and community care burden. We find that women academics at UG reported to have worked under intense stress and strain to meet their family care obligations and the demands of their jobs as three levels of mothering – biological, othermothering and community mothering – dominated participants' narratives of their pandemic experiences. It is also observed that self-reported productivity levels, including research and writing, dropped drastically for most women academics as demands for care increased, and this lack of productivity resulted in anxiety. This is because the women academics prioritised the safety of their families, communities, and the University over their career progression during the lockdown. Moreover, the COVID-19 restrictions limited extended family members from reducing the care burden on women academics specifically during the lockdown. To deal with the anxiety and stress, some women academics found respite in institutional and social level networks. However, the women academics also acknowledged that working from home was beneficial because they were able to combine their childcare responsibilities with their academic work.

## Introduction

This paper analyses the lived experiences of women academics at the University of Ghana (UG) during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021. It further interrogates how women academics navigated state and UG's responses to the pandemic while endeavouring to fulfill their career responsibilities amidst an increased familial, institutional and community care burden. Generally, COVID-19 dramatically increased women's care burden because of lockdowns, school closures, strict physical distancing, and high levels of morbidity and mortality (Burki, 2020). For women academics working in a sector that is inherently male-centric and male-dominated, which made marginal changes in productivity demands even amid a global crisis, it is essential to understand how they navigated the pandemic and the extent to which their productivity levels were affected. Generally, there is no evidence that research and publication requirements of academics, being the most arduous of all the assessment requirements, were revised in cognisance of the impact of the pandemic on academic staff, let alone to consider how such impacts are gendered. In the African region, the context of resource limitations for academic work, socio-cultural demands on women, and high teaching workloads are likely to complicate the ability of female academics to thrive and achieve their career goals. At the same time, women in Africa have been acclaimed for their agency and resilience in handling difficult situations (Tsikata, 2007; Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011; Chitsamatanga *et al*., 2018). In this paper, we analyse the gender roles played by female academics and how these roles deepen their career vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID pandemic. In our analyses of primary data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), we explore the interactions between female academics' expression of their gender roles, particularly motherhood (be it familial or social), and their expression of agency in a global crisis. We further interrogate the extent to which such interactions enable their career advancement.

Generally, the global COVID-19 pandemic, associated with quarantines, contact tracing, lockdowns, physical distancing, and school closures, has turned homes into the locus for increased family caregiving and paid work for most women. This shift created both opportunities and challenges for women. Psycho-social reactions, such as increased levels of anxiety, fear, trauma, social isolation, and stigmatisation have been noted among women (Turabian, 2020). COVID-19-related reproductive health issues, domestic violence, and various forms of abuse and exploitation have also been recorded (Alon *et al*., 2020; Anurudran *et al*., 2020;

Turabian, 2020). With classrooms moving into people's living spaces, mothers bear the more significant burden of homeschooling and domestic duties, and must juggle that with their work or studies. The adjustment has not been easy for many women (Alon *et al.,* 2020; Burki, 2020). The intersections of gender, age, position, occupation, and class has had an impact on how the pandemic affected the lives of women.

The gig economy is the most obvious sector with the direst pandemic impact. Naturally, most of the literature on COVID-19 and employment for women has focused on informal jobs, in particular service sectors such as hospitality, health, and tourism. This narrow focus left gaps in existing literature, thereby calling for more research on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education (Tu *et al.*, 2021). In education, the focus has been on pre-tertiary education, staff layoffs and the provision of online teaching (Vlachopoulos, 2020). Few studies address how women in institutions of higher learning, being in supposedly secure and high-status occupations, are impacted by COVID-19, less so examining its possible impact on their productivity and potentially on their career progression. It remains uncertain if COVID-19 has eroded any gains made in gender parity in the male-dominated field of academia, where females generally experience structural and practical barriers to their productivity and career progression. While a couple of studies conducted in the Global North have interrogated how female academics experienced COVID-19, the context in African universities is unknown (Couch, 2021).

Globally, women constitute a small percentage of academics in higher education, with only a small proportion of them attaining positions of power and decision-making (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). Once recruited, females in the knowledge arena need to manage and cope with the ever-demanding tasks of teaching and grading, writing research grant applications, researching and publishing, mentoring, tutoring, doing committee work, reviewing papers, student research supervision, and community service. Generally, career progression including academic promotion and accessing leadership positions is key to job retention. Reasons for female academics' measured ability to navigate their career expectations and to progress at par with their male counterparts have been dominated by the former's reproductive and familial care burdens, the glass-ceiling of patriarchal institutional cultures, unsupportive male colleagues, insufficient mentoring opportunities and institutional policies which do not favour female academics (Chitsamatanga *et al.*, 2018). Undue stress has been observed among female academics in South Africa,

who find their work more stressful than men, albeit being able to cope better with the demands of intellectual labour than men (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011; Mlambo and Mabokela, 2015). They are also more likely to suffer occupational burnout (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011). Coincidentally, only a few women progress to top managerial positions; there is therefore a lack of a critical mass of females in positions of power to create the needed gender reforms in institutional policies (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Liani *et al*., 2020).

In Africa, the progression of female academics has been further impeded by insufficient research funds, inadequate scientific training, high teaching load, lack of relevant professional networks, and constraints from gendered social and familial norms (Tsikata, 2007; Riordan and Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Oti, 2013). At the same time, they may be classified into the upper echelon of the middle class, being high-status urban women in the bottom of the top wealth quintile. Their status as privileged and knowledgeable women also places enormous social and financial responsibilities on them beyond their immediate families, particularly their elderly kinsfolk. Compared with female academics in the Global North, female academics in Africa may be more likely to access kin support and find relatively cheaper domestic services for their domestic reproductive work. However, in a dispensation where the COVID-19 pandemic has evoked intense fear of contagion, mandatory social isolation, and physical distancing rules, many women academics were left on their own to manage caring and family responsibilities (Guy and Arthur, 2020; Fulweiler *et al*., 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the multiple populations in the higher education ecosystem deserves research attention. The changing dynamics of higher institutions during the pandemic will have lasting effects on teaching delivery and learning requirements and the conditions under which research is conducted (Marinoni *et al*., 2020). The added focus on teaching and learning through distant and virtual platforms has been accompanied with dwindling research funding. Furthermore, students and staff face unprecedented challenges including access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning, and the requirements of specific fields of study, while offering opportunities for flexible learning possibilities (Marinoni *et al*., 2020). The shifts that most universities made including campus closures, moving classes online and other efforts to mitigate contagion were also witnessed at UG as it sought to assume its responsibilities to society. The response by the UG was both similar to other institutions across Africa

and was targeted to address its specific features as one of the oldest and one of the larger public institutions in Ghana. The UG, being the premier tertiary institution in Ghana as of July 2020 has a female faculty population of 366, constituting 26% of all faculty. The gender biases in higher education manifesting through the demands of knowledge, labour, social, personal, and institutional barriers to women's career growth and the gendered effects of COVID-19 have greatly impacted women faculty. This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of women faculty members in the COVID-19 era at the UG concerning their family, community, and the university.

In this paper, we analyse the gender roles played by women academics and how these roles deepen their career vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We interrogate the extent to which their lived experiences model the normative gender roles of "mothering" (biological or social) and interact with their academic productivity. In a country where most poor people are females, and only about 3% of women 40–49 years old are educated above secondary level, female academics hold special places in their lineages to mentor and "mother" younger family members. This research does not seek to measure women's career progression at the UG during the study period. Instead, the lived experiences of women participants will highlight the challenges and opportunities women faced at the university during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which would impact their career progression in a few years to come.

## Contextual Bases of the Study of Family Systems, Feminisation of Care, and COVID-19

African family systems are undergoing rapid transformations characterised by urbanisation, long(er) years spent in education and training for females and employment outside the home - leading to a weakening of lineage bonds of support and care for families (Ocholla Ayayo, 2000; Nukunya, 2003; Oppong, 2006). Traditional fostering practices that provided a secure stream of younger relatives in the home have declined (Afrifa, 2010). Marriages have also become more nuclearised, obligations toward kinship groups have declined and the traditional involvement of the matrikin in caring roles is fast eroding (Oppong, 2004). To fill the enormous gap in family support and care, many middle-class women in nuclear households outsource care and housework to domestic workers and nannies (Tsikata *et al.*, 2012). Until recently, families that engaged professionals or other paid workers to care intimately for the aged or seriously ill at home were frequently stigmatised.

This "outsourcing" is seen as a sign of family dysfunction or downright wickedness (Atobrah, 2009; Agyei-Mensah and de Graft Aikins, 2010). Although historically men contributed materially to the care of kin throughout Africa, the female kin are mainly responsible for providing everyday care (Atobrah, 2013).

Despite the changes in kinship support, "popular culture homogenises the characteristics of an ideal woman as a natural, committed, faithful, and effective nurturer of the species who embraces domesticity, cooks for her family (preferably fresh food daily) and sees to the efficient and seamless management of her home" (Atobrah and Adomako Ampofo, 2016: 178). With COVID-19 domesticating women academics as they work from home, their likelihood of fully resuming their "traditional mandate" and performing normative femininity is high. At the same time, the requirements of academia take no cognisance of women's increased care burden during the pandemic. This is because mothering, othermothering, and community mothering, as Wane (2000) indicated, are rooted in the African philosophy that children belong to their biological parents and the whole community. As such, a "good woman" is expected to also mother the other children in her kin group and in her community without necessarily keeping them under her roof.

At this point, we find it important to reflect on the relationship between the management of the COVID-19 crisis and performance of female academics. In reference to COVID-19 responses and women's increased care burden, Branicki (2020: 873) argues compellingly that "how a crisis is managed has both material and ethical consequences". She decries the inherently military and behaviourist approaches to crisis management, pointing to how such seemingly neutral responses are imbued with masculine logic and punish women. Drawing on the ethics of care analysis by Gilligan (1993), Branicki (2020) calls us to consider the relational aspects of crisis management and the caring relationships and duties required in crises instead of merely focusing on neoliberal and economic interests in crisis responses. She calls for a feminist logic of crisis that takes note of and accounts for women's care provisioning to sustain human connections and keep everyone in the web. For Branicki (2020), "the principal ethical orientation of classical crisis management is egoistic, calculative and broadly utilitarian" (2020: 875). This is unfortunate and corroborates the assertion of Held (2006) that "turning everyone into a liberal individual leaves no one adequately attentive to relationships between persons, whether they be caring relations within the family or social relations holding communities together" (2006: 95).

With special focus on the university in Africa, we contend that these spaces that are inherently male-dominated threaten the very existence of women academics. Barnes (2007) argues that "the colonial project was the feminisation of African "maleness". This trend was reversed immediately following independence, and universities became the site for reclaiming manhood. African universities under this "new-men" approach elevate men as thinkers, debaters, athletes and where "boys became men" (Barnes, 2007). Despite the transformations the African university has undergone since independence, there exists both a practical and ideological bias against women faculty. Mama (2006) contends that African universities should be places of knowledge creation and research and should be free of gender inequalities. She argues that in addressing gender disparities in African universities, there are three steps to address issues of gender equity.

The UG's institutional culture is consistent with the patriarchal nature of typical gender roles in Ghana. This culture manifests through formal and informal interactions. In a study conducted in (2007) by Manuh et al. that focused on Universities in Ghana, women academics remarked that they were encouraged to place greater emphasis on their accomplishments as mothers and wives over their academic pursuits. Some women were encouraged to put (Mrs) in front of their official title to reinforce this commitment (Manuh et al., 2007). This culture is still prevalent today as numerous women at the University of Ghana are viewed as (Mrs) as a precursor to their academic position. Debates and discussions about gender at the UG are often relegated to CEGENSA and specific departments and institutes such as the Institute of African Studies that are connected to CEGENSA. This further marginalises female academics as they navigate their careers (Tsikata, 2007). The University lacks a transparent policy to institutionalise gender parity that considers the unique challenges that women face at the UG.

According to Mama (2007), for the UG to address these issues, it must first embark on a three-step process at the institutional and national levels. The first step is to ensure that there is a national and local commitment to gender equity; second, that institutions of higher education should produce gender-competent graduates who transfer this competency to their respective personal and professional lives; the third is to view the university as a site where knowledge is produced that is not influenced by gender bias and norms (Mama, 2007).

## The University of Ghana and its Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The UG, founded in 1948, has both a colonial legacy and one that is rooted in the liberation struggle. The university's history, student and faculty activism, and central position in Ghanaian education ensure that students and faculty enjoy a certain level of prestige. The history of the UG positions it as a beacon of hope and prosperity for many individuals, communities, and nations.

Currently, the university as a residential campus has 53,643 students, of which 48% identify as women (UG Enrollment, 2020). It employs 1,248 teaching and research faculty, of which 366 are women with nine being full professors. The ratio of students to faculty (43 students to 1 faculty member) is alarmingly high as it is three times the international standard of 18 students to 1. Women faculty make up 26% of all teaching and research staff, which is grossly low compared to the student population. It appears that this percentage has not drastically increased over the last decade. Tsikata (2007) reported that female faculty were disproportionately represented in lower lecturer grades and made up only 20,3% of the faculty at the time of the study. Mabokela and Mlambo (2015) reinforced the findings of the earlier study particularly in relationship to gendered nature of institutions and impact on women faculty. The socio-cultural characteristics of the University have impacted women's experience. Women in this study lamented about the difficulty they encountered while balancing home and work life. The lack of support services for women academics, such as childcare facilities, buttresses the belief that the University does not prioritize the needs of faculty and staff that are women (Mabokela and Mlambo, 2015). The UG has made little progress in employing female faculty and addressing the gendered nature of its institutions since the Tsikata study was published. The slow progress towards gender parity has influenced female faculty's career progression at the UG.

The conditions of service of UG faculty exclusive of gender includes large in-person class sizes, particularly at the undergraduate level, heavy extension commitments internally, low compensation levels and stringent promotion guidelines. In addition to these common challenges, women often face additional overt and covert discrimination based on gender. Besides their regular responsibilities, women academics typically participate in othermothering in their capacity as faculty members at the UG. The pressure to marry and have children as women academics is part and parcel of women's experience at UG in keeping with the pro-natalist

national cultures of Ghana, noting that they receive conflicting advice from senior colleagues about when and how to do this (Tsikata, 2007). The UG's COVID-19 policy compounded by a male-centric institutional culture does not take into consideration the unique challenges of female academics. Women and men at the UG, despite the patriarchal nature of society, have the same teaching loads, extension responsibilities, and research requirements for promotion.

The university responded to the pandemic swiftly, following directives by the President of Ghana to close all educational institutions. It prioritised the safety of faculty, staff, and students. The UG instituted rigid COVID-19 protocols, which included immediately closing all offices and moving all meetings, correspondence, and work to virtual spaces (UG, Office of the Registrar, 2020). The UG used the mandatory two-week lockdown to organise and construct a COVID-19 response strategy. This included consultations with senior management, directors, chairs, department heads and faculty. In addition, the university offered intensive training on the Universities Learning Management System (LMS)-SAKAI to faculty to enable them to complete the 2019-2020 academic year virtually.

Faculty, staff, and students applauded the swift action by the university. However, as has been reported elsewhere, inequalities of access to technology, lack of network infrastructure in some communities, challenges with computer literacy and financial stressors associated with online teaching emerged (Obonnaya *et al.*, 2020). The UG attempted to address issues of access by supplying students, faculty, and some administrative staff with monthly data bundles from May to August 2020.

Despite these challenges, the state of the pandemic obliged the university to announce on 23 December 2020 that the mode of instruction for the 2020-2021 academic year would be entirely online (UG, Office of the Registrar, 2020). The University focused on ensuring that teaching and learning continued without disruption during this crisis, which may have created voids in other critical areas, including culturally constructed gender differences.

## Research Methodology

### Data collection

This study collected the lived experiences of women academics at the UG between March 2020 and March 2021. The research used virtual (Zoom) FGDs and in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data. Respondents were initially contacted via email,

telephone, and WhatsApp. After receiving assurance of participation in the research, a follow-up email was sent with a confirmation and Zoom meeting link. The sample size comprised 15 women academics in the College of Basic and Applied Sciences (CBAS) and the College of Humanities (COH). Three FGDs were held: two with women in the COH and one in the CBAS. All the interviews and FGDs were conducted between 21 April and 4 May 2021. Respondents were purposely sampled from these two colleges because of the differences in teaching and research experiences as well as the number of undergraduate and graduate students. While science academics were mainly involved in laboratory-based research and experiments, academics from the humanities were mainly involved in humanistic research. We ensured that respondents were selected from different departments within the two colleges. This approach was intended to safeguard respondents' confidentiality and privacy due to the personal nature of the questions. We also wanted respondents to have no inhibitions in responding to the questions. However, members in one FGD were familiar with each other and had no issues engaging in discussions at a personal level. Although all respondents were assured that participating in the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any point in time if they felt uncomfortable with the process, none of the respondents opted out. Rather, most respondents expressed their delight at how the process enabled them to take stock of their COVID-19 experience. For some respondents, participating in the interviews gave them an opportunity to vent their issues and to find comfort in knowing that others also shared in their experiences. The diversity of the women is represented by women at varying stages of their career at UG.

## Data Analysis

The semi-structured questions focused on women's lived experiences during the three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 - before, during, and after the lockdown - and how their experiences impacted their career productivity. The transcribed interviews were analysed by mapping out the similarities and differences in the information and subsequently grouping them into themes. The two broad themes are 1) *mothering and care responsibilities* and 2) *academic work stresses and adjustments*.

The first theme, which centres on mothering and othermothering, highlights the challenges women academics face due to the structural systems present in society. This theme considers issues pertaining to family, care burdens and forms

of motherhood both at the family level and beyond the family space into "other" spaces. The second theme looks at adjustments and coping strategies of the women academics in their work.

## Demographic Description of Respondents

The demographic description of the respondents is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic descriptions of respondents with pseudonyms

| Pseudonym | Age Group | College | Seniority |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adeze | 40s | CBAS | Senior Lecturer |
| Adjoe | 60s | COH | Associate Professor |
| A'isha | 40s | CBAS | Senior Lecturer |
| Ama | 50s | COH | Senior Lecturer |
| Afia | 40s | COH | Associate Professor |
| Afrya | 40s | COH | Senior Member |
| Eua | 50s | COH | Professor |
| Halimatu | 30s | CBAS | Lecturer |
| Laboni | 40s | COH | Lecturer |
| Fifime' | 40s | COH | Senior Lecturer |
| Maji | 40s | COH | Lecturer |
| Naa Ajeley | 50s | COH | Senior Lecturer |
| Nana Yaa | 40s | COH | Senior Lecturer |
| Taani | 30s | CBAS | Lecturer |
| Yaa | 40s | CBAS | Senior Lecturer |

Most of the women in the study were married with at least one child.[2] 12 of the 15 women were married and 14 had children. Two women were divorced and one woman was single. Eight of the women had two to three children while three of the women had four or more children.

2 We chose not to indicate the marital status and number of children for each respondent because we wanted to conceal the identity of respondents.

## Findings

The results show that the women academics were confronted with challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic in multiple ways. They swiftly adjusted to managing increased responsibilities at home and in their community and ensured a work-life balance while engaging in other social activities. The women who participated in this study tackled and experienced COVID-19 through a unique cultural and gendered lens. They shared their lived experiences navigating COVID-19 in a largely male-centric institution and society. This study does not provide conclusive findings that can be blindly applied across Africa. Instead, it provides a window into the lives of women academics. It juxtaposes their experiences with current literature and the social and cultural understandings of gender in Ghana. This section discusses the findings under two broad themes, namely *mothering and care responsibilities* and *academic work stresses, adjustments, and coping strategies*.

## Mothering and Care Responsibilities

### *Familial Mothering*

Among both matrilineal and patrilineal societies in Ghana, there is ample evidence in history, popular culture, and oral traditions to situate the role of mothers and wives. Despite deep respect, admiration and at times unrealistic expectations of wives and mothers in Ghana, family dynamics have evolved to meet the demands of globalisation (Oppong, 2006). In addition to globalisation shifting family dynamics, Ghanaian and Africanist feminists have shifted the patriarchal needle in Ghana through their academic and activist careers (Mama, 2020). This study reinforced the importance of motherhood in Ghana as more than half of our participants attested that being wives and mothers is central to their identity. Ama is married to a pastor and has achieved success in her career at the UG. However, according to her, her role as a wife and mother is paramount to her identity.

> *Besides my career, which is going out to school to work, I also have responsibilities: family life, if I may put it that way. I was born in a very traditional home. I learned from my mother that I must be a good wife, ensure that there is food on the table always, keep the house clean, and most importantly, do my cooking* (Ama, COH).

The need to be a good mother and responsible wife resonated with many of the participants. Some told stories about prioritising their husband's work over their own at the beginning of the pandemic. This translated to women coming home and taking a back seat to everything and everyone. Women who pre-COVID-19 would spend most of the workday in the office were suddenly faced with familial expectations that dictated they perform most of the domestic duties. Laboni, whose husband is also a pastor, during the early period of the lockdown, spent most of her day caring for her children. Her husband spent most of his workday in their joint study revising strategies to reach his congregation. She supported his efforts but also recognised that she had to complete her work at UG and so devised a strategy to carve out time for her academic work. She timed her work to coincide with the time her husband was taking a midday break.

The triple burden of homeschooling, extended family caregiving and academic responsibilities impacted women with young children. Academic responsibilities were often relegated to a secondary or third position. The traditional role of women in Ghana necessitated that all but four women in the study with young children were burdened with additional familial care responsibilities. These included, but were not limited to, homeschooling diverse-aged children, providing several cooked meals daily and managing the household. Afrya described her experience as overwhelming but necessary. She says,

> *I was cooking so much I got to a point where I was depressed but I had to ensure that my family was fed well and consumed healthy foods* (Afrya, COH).

Women in our study discussed their multi-mothering duties during COVID-19 and the imposition on their financial, social, physical, and emotional health. Even though most of the women were married and lived with their husbands, they felt obligated to cook three meals a day – to ensure the health of their family – and stock the pantries of their mothers, aunts, church members and other needy community members.

Familial responsibilities among women in the CBAS and COH did not differ much; in fact, the experiences of non-Ghanaian respondents were also similar. Fifime, from a neighbouring African country, had similar experiences to her Ghanaian colleagues. During the first week of COVID-19, she had to juggle being a single mother with a sudden family illness and academic responsibilities. She said:

> I was at the hospital with my sister, so I had to leave my children and could not cook anything. It was very difficult for me as I was shuttling between

> the hospital and home. Sometimes I would ask one of the Visiting Scholar colleagues to cook for the children" (Fifime, COH).

Afia is a senior lecturer, and like her colleague, Fifime, she plays a central role in her extended family. During the pandemic, her father-in-law passed away and she planned his funeral while managing familial, social and academic responsibilities.

Homeschooling placed burdens on women (mothers) who suddenly doubled as teachers. The opening of the Ghana Education Service schools was initially viewed as a positive move by some of the participants but swiftly became another obstacle for women academics. The phased opening, double-tracking Senior Secondary School system and early closing times obliged women to pick up their children in the early afternoon. This burden impacted their ability to be fully present in the office beyond the afternoons, and some of their male colleagues misunderstood their actions, suggesting that they were not being productive at work given the time required for research collaborations and team meetings. The assumption that they were leaving the office to shirk their academic responsibility underlies these criticisms. Additionally, women participate in othermothering of students, faculty, and staff in ways that their male counterparts generally do not participate in. Willey (2020) suggests that rigid social and workplace policies that present a one-size-fits-all approach to promotion harms mothers and caregivers.

Positively, several women discovered that the initial lockdown allowed them to deepen and explore familial relations. Eua, one of a few women whose children are over 18 years, discussed the benefit of this experience for her family. She said:

> *I have three adults at home, so the family dynamic was very good, and we started doing things together....I think we changed our family dynamics for a while because for once, I was not travelling all the time, so I was able to spend some time with the family together* (Eua, COH).

Ama also remarked that she enjoyed her time with her family during the lockdown. She said:

> *In a way, I think there was much bonding during that time. We would meet every evening to fellowship, sing, pray, read Scriptures, and sometimes join the children to cook. We were doing things together. We also played basketball and did gymnastics together. So, I think that we enjoyed each other's company* (Ama, COH).

The benefit of re-connecting as a family (immediate and extended) was highlighted among most respondents.

## *Social Mothering – Othermothering and Community Mothering*

Community mothering in Ghana is an expectation, a responsibility, and a sense of pride for many Ghanaian women. Community mothering has cultural connections to collectivism, which is deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture. It also serves to reciprocate for women's support received from community mothers during different periods of their lives (Waterhouse *et al.*, 2017). During the COVID-19 period, there was a heightened level of community mothering. Most of the women in the study hold significant roles in their immediate and extended families. These women are mothers in their churches, associations, and the larger community. Three of the women in COH and CBAS FGDs are married to pastors. As pastors' wives, they have real and imagined motherly responsibilities. Clergy wives in Ghana play multiple roles, including counselling, group leading, singing in the choir, preaching, cleaning the church as well as welcoming and serving guests (Kyere, 2019). The combination of being an academic, first lady, mother, and wife places additional pressures on women.

The women in the COH group provided community mothering support to their extended families. Several ensured that their guardians and in-laws had foodstuffs to last them through the initial lockdown. Laboni, who lives in one of the COVID-19 hotspots, reported a heavy military presence in her community which complicated life during the lockdown. She ultimately participated in community shopping for those in her immediate circle. When she went to the shop, she would purchase enough food for multiple families. Much like her colleague, Afia, and other women in the study, she expressed excitement and a sense of pride in supporting her extended community.

Respondents were compelled to provide financial and material support to needy people they knew because of their secure income. All but two of the women reported purchasing foodstuffs for members of their extended community. Afia and Maji created care packages for needy church members, elderly or disadvantaged family members and economically challenged families in their immediate community. All the respondents sent mobile money to non-family members who were in desperate need during the COVID-19 period. Eua, when asked about her financial commitments during this period, remarked:

> *They were people who were supposed to be working but because of COVID-19, they couldn't work. But I thought to myself that those were temporary crises, and we will spontaneously deal with it* (Eua, COH).

Many of the individuals who requested support were extended family members, former domestic workers, gardeners, junior colleagues, and friends in need. Afia sent money via mobile money outlets to the teachers at her children's school. Notably, during the school closures, staff of private schools in the country did not receive their salaries so they relied on support from their extended community. Nana Yaa explained that senior members in her department collected donations for junior staff members. Historically, the salary of junior staff is low; however, they often have similar responsibilities as senior members. The burden increased for single parents who had a single source of income.

An additional financial burden was from new modes of movement using public transport. Travelling on crowded public transport systems such as *trotro*[3] (minibus) was viewed as dangerous, hence the respondents resorted to taxis and ride-hailing transport services such as Bolt and Uber. Fifime used to take a *trotro* to the Madina Market (one of Accra's most popular outdoor markets) before the pandemic. However, she stopped using it, shifted to the Accra Mall for foodstuff, and even purchased a bicycle.

Several of the women working at the UG got involved in othermothering. Fifime as a single mother was still expected to othermother family, students, and the community. She reported that a cousin asked for a substantial loan to purchase items for their provisions shop. Despite her own circumstances, she loaned money to her cousin. Naa Ajeley was an administrator for international students. She had to othermother two international students who stayed in Ghana during the initial stages of the pandemic. She stated,

> *Twice in a day throughout these two weeks that they stayed in Ghana I had to support them like a mother would. One needed to call the COVID-19 hotline to see if they had symptoms and if they were positive or needed to take a sample to determine if they were positive. All this responsibility fell on my shoulders as a mother* (Naa Ajeley, COH).

Women at the UG are routinely identified as Auntie, Madam, or Mama, thus creating a sense of motherhood in the academy. Datta and Lund (2018) mention similar experiences in their careers as educators. However, male counterparts are identified by their titles and professional achievements (Tsikata, 2007). During this period, women in the CBAS who had projects with individuals who worked in their laboratories othermothered their younger colleagues. A'isha had several non-Ghanaians who

3 Privately owned commercial minibuses that travel fixed routes in Ghana.

worked in her lab. They could not return home and were naturally frightened about the impact of the pandemic at home and in Ghana. She had to be a mother figure to ensure that they were safe, not exposed to COVID-19, and mentally and emotionally supported. Some of the respondents othermothered women colleagues who experienced challenges during that period. Nana Yaa served as the primary support for a colleague who had two small children and contracted COVID-19 in March 2020. She was by her side from the very beginning of the transmission through her follow-up appointments until she tested negative.

## Academic Work Stresses, Adjustments and Coping Strategies

When the lockdown was instituted in the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi regions, the initial reaction of the women academics was to rest. Some had been combining administrative duties with teaching, research, and supervision. Others had been experiencing health challenges that impacted their academic work, and the lockdown provided an opportunity to rest, recuperate and de-stress. The lives of many of the women interviewed were so overstretched that it was affecting their productivity. Ama described her pre-COVID-19 life as,

> *Before the lockdown, I observed that I was exhausted and was breaking down. I don't live on campus. So, every morning, I rush out of the house to get to campus. By the time I settle down, I'm already tired....So, when the lockdown was implemented, I found it welcoming because I needed a break* (Ama, COH).

Combining academic work with administrative responsibilities is a tedious task that could impact the health of both women and men. Eua reported that the lockdown allowed her space to recuperate from a long-standing chronic health challenge. She explained,

> *I was very ill at the beginning of the lockdown. So, to me, the lockdown was a moment of rest because I had just had a treatment for a long-standing chronic problem....I also started to exercise and that was the positive side of it* (Eua, COH).

Unfortunately, the dynamics changed when the lockdown ended and academic work at the UG resumed. Teaching was remotely delivered through virtual means, although schools remained physically closed. Those women with young children were saddled with the double burden of caring for their young children while at the same time fulfilling their online teaching duties. They helped their children with

their online work and assignments and cared for sick members of their immediate and extended families. Thus, they adopted coping mechanisms to ensure a work-life balance. In terms of teaching, although the respondents had received several weeks of training in the use of the SAKAI LMS, faculty found it daunting and overwhelming. Some women were being introduced to the rudiments of virtual teaching and still had to deal with distractions from home. For women in the CBAS, the practical and laboratory-based nature of the sciences made it almost impossible to deliver lectures online. That posed many challenges to the women in science. A'isha recounted her experience:

> *My undergraduate course was a practical course that needed to help the students develop skills....I had to come up with ways of ensuring that they would be able to have those skills* (A'isha, CBAS).

Almost all the women interviewed had in one way or another encountered some challenges because of the pandemic. These challenges surfaced in all spheres of their lives, including family, academic and social spaces. Academically, the women were most stressed given the fact that they had teaching and research deadlines. The semester was shortened to eight weeks with six weeks allocated for lecture delivery and the remaining for examination. Time spent on academic work preparation doubled and this introduced another level of work-related stress. However, with time, most women found alternative ways to adjust to the challenges by holding discussions and delivering lectures synchronously via online and virtual platforms such as Whatsapp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, while uploading lecture slides and notes onto the SAKAI LMS platform.

The incidence of COVID-19 introduced another challenge of meeting virtually. Management meetings, student supervision meetings, research collaborations and university meetings were all scheduled online. Initially, these virtual meetings were seen as a convenience. Unfortunately, the frequency of the meetings became overwhelming, and this increased the work burden for women academics, especially when they tried to combine childcare responsibilities with such meetings. To be able to deal with the increasing workload, some of the women worked during the day between domestic duties and continued at night when everyone slept. The incidence of COVID-19 introduced a lot of anxiety in the women. First, they were thinking of their children, their elderly parents, their work and lastly themselves. Some were primary caregivers to their aged parents and were very worried how the aged folks were going to cope and pull through the pandemic given the fact that

they had underlying health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart conditions. The women also had to think of the welfare of their family and ensure that they were protected and kept safe from COVID-19. For those who were directly responsible for students' welfare, it added another level of responsibility. In all these situations, they struggled to combine both mothering and care responsibilities with teaching. The stress resulted in some women developing health issues and showing extreme anxiety. Their anxiety was compounded by the inadequate and false COVID-19 information peddling within social media spaces.

To help them deal with some of the stresses, some of the women joined online social support groups. Ama, Eua, and Adjoe mentioned their participation in an online health and wellness group that supported them during the pandemic. This online group encouraged members to set goals for exercising and promoted healthy eating. Ama says about the group:

> *When we started this 21-day exercise, I identified a lady who was involved in a dance workout in her home. So, I decided to join her. And it has helped me. Instead of staying home all the time, I work out with her twice a week* (Ama, COH).

While studies have shown the relationship between social networks and improved mental health among students (Elmer *et al.*, 2020), we also observed a positive correlation among our respondents. The incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted research activities and funding opportunities, especially human-centered research. The women academics could not go out to the field to collect data because they did not want to be exposed to the disease, since they were the primary caregivers at home. Alternative means, including virtual, online and social networks were deployed to collect data remotely. Most of the discussants mentioned that they were not successful in winning research grants because several donor agencies had suspended funding. The few who were lucky to be on funded projects kept on receiving constant reminders from the funding agencies who claimed they were empathising with them and yet were indirectly checking on work progress, and these constant reminders of timelines introduced another level of stress. Others were just not in a reasonable frame of mind to write funding proposals nor to conduct any research.

COVID-19 in Africa created opportunities for some of the discussants to receive invitations to collaborate in research projects. However, there was the general perception among the women academics in the COH that these collaborations were

unbalanced. According to them, these invitations are a false display of interest in the developing world's management strategies in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. Naa Ajeley shared her views:

> *I noticed the audacity of some UK colleagues who never got in touch, never did anything...all of a sudden, they knew that you were alive.... And you needed to be available because they want to talk about Africa, and they want to look at what was going on, the African exceptionalism in terms of the fact that we're not dying like flies, as initially predicted by Melinda Gates. So, it's an interesting mixed bag for me, because, for me very much the opportunism of the industrial West and how we perceive Africa and African scholarship was very evident when their researchers could not parachute onto the continent, and come and do a one week and take data and go out there and write and have the theories and then expect us to quote them*" (Naa Ajeley, COH).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the university also meant that administrative responsibilities were suspended, freeing women of their administrative responsibilities and allowing them to focus on their academic work. Afrya, who was involved in an inactive project before the lockdown, said she used the period to revive her archiving project. Other women academics saw the lockdown as an opportunity to complete unfinished academic papers. For example, the periods between 30 March 2020 (when the lockdown took effect) up to 14 April 2020 (when remote teaching began) and from July 2020 until school reopened in January 2021 were the most fruitful for some of the women academics to do their academic writing and learn new methods of conducting virtual research. Laboni recounts her experiences:

> *During that time, I had to think of something else. So, I decided to read a bit on new methods, and I realised that I could use cyber-ethnography. I thought it was useful and I could do something while locked down. So, I did something in religious activities, especially the Christian religious activities during and after the lockdown* (Laboni, COH).

However, delays in procuring reagents and consumables for laboratory work impeded the activities of the science researchers because all departments and units in the university were working at half capacity and it required several bureaucratic processes and approvals to purchase the items. From all the discussions, the women acknowledged that by working from home, they were able to combine their childcare responsibilities with their academic work. Overall, the women viewed

working-from-home positively because it created an opportunity to have a work-life balance.

## Concluding Discussions and Recommendations

### Discussion

The UG over the last 60-odd years has transformed into an internationally recognised and highly regarded institution. However, the university has shown very little progress in addressing the gender gap, especially for university faculty and staff. The findings of this project are consistent with the findings of Tsikata (2007) over 14 years ago which highlight the gendered nature of institutions at the UG. The progress over this period regarding employing women faculty is a mere six per cent which equated to less than 0,42% of women hired yearly over the period.

This research has revealed that gender-based inequality and systemic inadequacies at the UG in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded the gendered nature of women's employment at the university. The lack of cognisance of the gender differentials in the institutional response to the management of COVID-19 was apparent in the data. No specific measures were put in place to address the unique experience of women academics in Ghana during this period. The gendered nature of Ghanaian culture both supported the community and burdened women faculty and administrators at the UG.

The findings uncovered two interrelated themes that affected women academics in Ghana: that women were impacted by the transformation of family systems and the feminisation of care in Ghana, and unequal work dynamics exist in academia. These findings are synonymous with other research which shows that shifts in household labor, childcare, eldercare and physical confinement have increased the mental health needs of students and faculty's mental health needs and reduced the time available to perform academic work (Miller, 2021).

Family structures in Ghana, particularly in urban communities and among the middle-class, have transformed over several years. The findings suggest an increase in the feminisation of care in Ghana during the pandemic. The feminisation of care is consistent with the gendered social roles in most Ghanaian families. Previously, families enjoyed support from extended members but now families in the urban centres are more nuclearised, thereby denying women the traditional support from female kinfolk. This was also worsened by the social and physical distancing rule

instituted in response to the pandemic, which further barred female academics from accessing domestic care services. The risks of COVID-19 outweighed the need for additional support, and many women were left to shoulder all domestic burdens. Women who had more than one child under 16 in the home or elderly parents were particularly impacted by the changing family dynamics. Afrya has four children, all under 18, with the youngest being six years old. She was responsible for supporting her family, her sister's children (while she was stuck outside the country), her elderly mother and her in-laws while at the same time working on launching a new project at work. She ordinarily would have employed in-home support, but the fear of COVID-19 both on her part and the part of those being employed made it impossible for this to come to fruition. The transformation of the family structure in Ghana can be viewed as a move towards greater equality and independence; however, the conditions on the ground tell a dramatically different story. This move has increased the burden on women living in urban centers. They are expected to perform historical gendered roles without the historical support systems.

Gender-based inequality in academia compounded the stress that women in the study faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Malisch *et al.* (2020) observed that while women in academia hold contingent positions and experience higher-than-average teaching loads, they are also assigned more remedial and introductory courses and counsel more students, including students needing additional support. In addition, students approach women faculty more for mental health support and expect them to be more nurturing (Malisch *et al.*, 2020). The patriarchal nature of academia is embedded in the institutions, attitudes, and systems at the UG. The imbalance in the number of female faculty compared to their male counterparts is representative of the gender-based inequality in Ghana. Of the 365 employed as faculty, only nine are full professors. The university does not have policies that take into consideration the gendered nature of the Ghanaian society. At the same time, women faculty are strongly encouraged to get married and have children. Women who are not married or have children are covertly viewed as incomplete. In comparison, women with children and domestic responsibilities are not afforded accommodation beyond the mandated maternity leave. The promotion guidelines do not consider discipline-specific guidelines, much less socially constructed gender roles.

The response of the UG to the pandemic was also gender blind. The policies focused on student continuity and left little room for special populations. Several of the women reported being overworked but feeling the necessity to continue to meet the demands of the university. Yaa recounted that she applied for nine grants during the COVID-19 period and did not win any. She remarked that one needs to publish findings at some point, and her inability to produce as many publications as some of her male colleagues hindered her ability to be successful with the grant applications. The paucity of women faculty at UG also results in the same women being overworked as there is an effort to ensure a gender balance on most committees, workshops, and conferences. However, this seemingly forward-looking gesture further oppresses women faculty who have the same promotion, teaching and extension requirements as their 882 male colleagues. The COVID-19 period heightened gender inequality and deepened gender cleavages at UG.

Much of the current research on COVID-19 and higher education is located in the Global North. The research team felt that it was essential to provide a vehicle to allow the voices of African and Ghanaian women to be heard. The lived experience of women in the study varied based on their position at UG, their husbands' roles in the family, number of children, extended family commitments and their role in religious institutions or other non-UG associations. Some of the women did not have stable support for childcare or care for elderly parents, which they reported impacted their academic productivity. These women are not likely to have had the time to develop their academic work during COVID-19. However, some of them were able to push through the struggles and engage in academic work, including writing, researching, international collaboration and speaking in workshops and on panels online.

The post-lockdown period brought some respite from consistent domestic duties for women academics, but it also introduced tensions in the academic space. Most women who had school-aged children had to leave work early to retrieve their children from school. This impacted their productivity but also caused tensions with their male colleagues. In a university with only 26% women faculty, these tensions can stall a woman's academic career. The challenges that women faced during the pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown periods were transformed into opportunities for most women. Several women are involved in COVID-19 testing and research and hope to contribute to the body of knowledge about COVID-19, the crisis and Africa. COVID-19 further exposed gender cleavages in the academy in general and in Ghana in particular.

## Limitations

This project identified several limitations that emerged due to the time constraints, COVID-19 restrictions and resources. The sample size was limited because of the need to collect data in just two months. This reduced our ability to buttress the findings with quantitative data from a larger, more representative sample. The resource limitations and COVID restrictions forced the team to focus on a small sector of the university ecosystem. We chose the lived experiences of women at the UG as a focal point, which meant that the team did not have the capacity to include men in the study. COVID-19 restrictions meant that the in-depth interviews and FGDs had to be conducted virtually, which made it difficult to assess body language.

## Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for future research and policies to close the gender gap at the UG. The following research areas would expand the literature on women academics in Africa: (1) The relationship between the gendered nature of universities in Africa and development; (2) Linkages between the feminisation of men during colonialism and the repression of women academics; (3) The role of other- and community mothering in academic success, career promotion for junior faculty and elevating the university internationally; and (4) Mental health, social networks, and African women academics.

During ordinary times, women academics at the UG are obliged to navigate a male-centric and gender-blind institution while adhering to (or actively fighting against) socially constructed gender roles. COVID-19 exacerbated the burden that women academics must traverse in their private and public lives. The pandemic blurred the private and public spaces such that women had to contend with gendered notions of womanhood while mothering, othermothering and developing coping strategies to meet their academic responsibilities and non-academic challenges. The experiences of women in the study are not necessarily representative of all women academics in Ghana or Africa; however, their lived experiences can be used as a yardstick for future research and university policies.

## References

Adomako Ampofo, Akosua et al. 2012. "Formalising the Informal and Informalising the Formal? Analysing Changes in Women's Work in the Domestic Service and the Banking Sector in Ghana; Final Technical Report." doi: http://hdl.handle.net/10625/49279.

Afrifa, Patricia. 2010. *Emerging Fostering Practices in Ghana: A Micro-Study of Institutionalised Fostering in the Tema Municipality.* MPhil thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

Agyei-Mensah, Samuel and de-Graft Aikins, Ama. 2010. "Epidemiological Transition and the Double Burden of Disease in Accra, Ghana", *Journal of Urban Health* 87 (5): 879–97.

Alon, Titan et al. 2020. *The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality* (No. w26947). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Anurudran, Ashri et al. "Domestic violence amid COVID-19", *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 150 (2): 255–256.

Atobrah, Deborah. 2009. "Caring for the Chronically Sick within Ga Families: A Case of Traditional Practices and Modern Innovations." PhD thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

Atobrah, Deborah. 2013. "Caring for the Seriously Ill in a Ghanaian Society: Glimpses from the Past", *Ghana Studies* 15 (16): 69–102.

Atobrah, Deborah and Adomako Ampofo, Akosua. 2016. "Expressions of masculinity and femininity in husbands' care of wives with cancer in Accra", *African Studies Review* 59 (1): 175–197.

Barnes, Teresa. 2007. "Politics of the Mind and Body: Gender and Institutional Culture in African Universities", *Feminist Africa* 8 (1): 8–25.

Bezuidenhout, Adele and Cilliers, Francis. 2011. "Age, Burnout, Work Engagement and Sense of Coherence in Female Academics at two South African Universities", *South African Journal of Labour Relations* 35 (1): 61–80.

Branicki, Layla J. 2020. "COVID-19, Ethics of Care and Feminist Crisis Management", *Gender, Work & Organization* 27 (5): 872–883.

Burki, Talha. 2020. "The Indirect Impact of COVID-19 on Women", *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20 (8): 904-905.

Chitsamatanga, Bellita B. et al. 2018. "Barriers to Research and Publication Efforts of Female Academics: A Case of Selected Universities in South Africa and Zimbabwe", *Anthropologist* 32 (1-3): 1–7.

Couch, Danielle L. et al. 2021. "What COVID- 19 could mean for the future of "work from home": The provocations of three women in the academy", *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28: 266–275.

Datta, Anindita and Lund, Ragnhild. 2018. "Mothering, mentoring and journeys towards inspiring spaces", *Emotion, Space and Society*, 26: 64–71.

Elmer, Timon et al. 2020. "Students Under Lockdown: Comparisons of Students' Social Networks and Mental Health Before and During The COVID-19 Crisis in Switzerland", *Plos one* 15 (7). Available at https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236337.

Gilligan, Carol. 1993. *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.

Guy, Batsheva and Arthur, Brittany. 2020. "Academic Motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating Our Dual Roles as Educators and Mothers", *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27 (5): 887–899.

Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

Howe-Walsh, Liza and Turnbull, Sarah. 2016. "Barriers to Women Leaders in Academia: Tales from Science and Technology", *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (3): 415–428.

Kyere, Abena. 2019. *For God and Man: A Study of the Clergy-Wife*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

Liani, Millicent L. et al. 2020. "Understanding Intersecting Gender Inequities in Academic Scientific Research Career Progression in Sub-Saharan Africa", *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 12 (2): 262–288.

Mabokela, Reitumetse O. and Mlambo, Yeukai A. 2015. ""The Older Women are Men": Navigating the Academic Terrain, Perspectives from Ghana"", *Higher Education* 69 (5): 759–778.

Malisch, Jessica L. et al. 2020. Opinion: In the wake of COVID-19, academia needs new solutions to ensure gender equity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(27), 15378-15381.

Mama, Amina. 2006. "Pursuing Gender Equality in the African University", *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity,* 1 (1): 53-79.

Mama, Amina and Barnes, Teresa. (Eds.). (2007). *Rethinking Universities I*. African Gender Institute.

Mama, Amina. 2020. 'We will not be pacified': From freedom fighters to feminists. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 27 (4): 362–380.

Manuh, Takyiwaa et al. 2007. *Change and transformation in Ghana's publicly funded universities. Partnership for Higher Education in Africa*. Oxford, UK: James Currey and Accra, Ghana: Woeli Publishing Services.

Marinoni, Giorgio et al. 2020. *The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education around the World*. IAU Global Survey Report.

Miller, Karyn E. 2021. The ethics of care and academic motherhood amid COVID-19. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28: 260–265.

Mlambo, Yeukai A. and Mabokela, Reitumetse O. 2017. "'It's more Flexible': Persistence of Women Engineers in the Academy", *European Journal of Engineering Education* 42 (3): 271–285.

Nukunya, Godwin K. 2003. *Tradition and Change: The Case of the Family*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

Ogbonnaya, Ugorji I. et al. 2020. "Move to online learning during COVID-19 lockdown: Pre-service teachers' experiences in Ghana." *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 19 (10): 286-303.

Ocholla-Ayayo, Andev B. 2000. "The African Family in Development Crisis in The Second Millennium", *African Anthropologist* 7 (1): 84–113.

Oppong, Christine. 2004. "Social Capital and Systems of Care: Some Contrasting Evidence", *Institute of African Studies Research Review* Supplement 16: 1–15.

Oppong, Christine. 2006. Familial roles and social transformations: Older men and women in sub-Saharan Africa. *Research on Aging* 28 (6): 654–668.

Oti, Adepeju O. 2013. "Social Predictors of Female Academics' Career Growth and Leadership Position in South-West Nigerian Universities", *Sage Open* 3 (no. 4). https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2158244013506439.

Riordan, Sarah and Louw-Potgieter, Joha. 2011. "Career Success of Women Academics in South Africa", *South African Journal of Psychology* 41 (2): 157–172.

Tsikata, Dzodzi. 2007. Women in Ghana at 50: Still Struggling to Achieve Full Citizenship? *Ghana Studies*, 10 (1): 163–206.

Tsikata, Dzodzi. 2007. Gender, institutional cultures and the career trajectories of faculty of the University of Ghana. *Feminist Africa 8: Rethinking Universities* 1 (8): 26-41.

Tu, Yidong et al. 2021. "COVID-19-induced Layoff, Survivors' COVID-19-related

Stress and Performance in Hospitality Industry: The Moderating Role of Social Support.", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 95. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102912., 102912.

Turabian, Jose L. 2020. Implications on mental health by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic: The role of general practitioner. *Arch Psychiatry and Mental Health* 4: 035–041.

Turabian, Jose L. 2020. "Sex and Gender Bio-psychosocial Differences in Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19): Men have more Biological Problems, but Women Suffer more Long-Term Serious Psychosocial Consequences and with more Implications for Population", *Journal of Women's Health Care* 9 (487). http://dx.doi.org/10.35248/2167-0420.20.9.487.

University of Ghana. (2020). Enrolment and Graduate Statistics. https://www.ug.edu.gh/about/enrolment-and-graduation-statistics.

University of Ghana - Office of the Registrar (2020). COVID-19 and University of Ghana' s Preparation for Resumption of Academic Work. 30 November 2020.

University of Ghana - Office of the Registrar (2020). Mode of Teaching and Learning for 2020/2021 Academic Year. 23 December 2020.

Vlachopoulos, Dimitrios. 2020. COVID-19: Threat or Opportunity for Online Education? *Higher Learning Research Communications 10* (1).

Wane, Njoki N. 2000. "Reflections on the Mutuality of Mothering: Women, Children, and Othermothering", *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 2 (2).

Waterhouse, Phillipa et al. 2017. "Combining Work and Child Care: The Experiences of Mothers in Accra, Ghana", *Development Southern Africa* 34 (6): 771–786. DOI: 10.1080/0376835X.2017.1323627.

Willey, Nicole L. 2020. "Parenting Policies and Culture in Academia and Beyond: Making It While Mothering (and Fathering) in the Academy, and What COVID-19 Has to Do with It", *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 11 (1).

# Gender Blind Spots in COVID-19 Containment and Mitigation Measures in Burkina Faso and Ghana

**Akosua K. Darkwah, Dorte Thorsen and Madeleine Wayack Pambè**

## Abstract

This article unpacks the gendered impacts of the containment and mitigation measures adopted in many countries to deal with the pandemic. Based on detailed data on the inclusivity of measures taken to contain the outbreak of COVID-19 in Burkina Faso and Ghana and the mitigation measures implemented to soften the fallout, the paper analyses the impact on women and girls. We argue that women occupy important micro-economic places in both countries, as breadwinners in families, and in informal trade, which accounts for a considerable proportion of the economy. However, there was little state recognition of the ripple effects of the closures of borders, markets and schools on them. The lack of recognition of gender differences and of the ways in which gender intersects with economic and regional inequalities was reinforced in the mitigation policies as well, undermining the advancement of gender equity goals made prior to the pandemic.

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, when neoliberalism became the dominant economic framework for managing the economies of the world, public spending and social protection measures for Africa's populations have not been of paramount concern to governments on the continent. Women, as the more vulnerable population on the continent, bear the brunt of this new reality. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity for Africa's governments to change its trajectory with respect to its economic policy-making approaches and to begin to demonstrate a fundamental concern with addressing the gendered inequalities that are endemic on the continent. The nature of the containment and mitigation measures introduced to address the pandemic provide a window into an assessment of African governments' performance in this regard. Across the continent, as Tsikata and Torvikey (2021) point out, the containment and mitigation measures were fairly similar. Containment measures

included hand hygiene, social distancing, and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in public; lockdowns of different time frames, as well as school and border closures. Mitigation measures have been of three kinds: access to basic services, social safety provisions, and financial support to businesses. A careful interrogation of these measures will provide insights into the extent to which African governments addressed the pandemic in a manner that also addressed gender inequalities in their societies.

In the health sector, there is a clear gender difference in mortality rates. The ratio of men to women dying after contracting COVID-19 was 1,1 in Angola, 1,3 in Kenya, and 1,5 in Sudan (Global Health 5050, 2021). A similar pattern has been observed in other countries as well (Ramirez-Soto *et al.*, 2021; Undurraga *et al.*, 2021). In both the public health and informal healthcare system, there is also a clear gender difference in who sustains these two systems. Around the world, health workers are disproportionately female, constituting 70% of the workforce (Pozzan and Cattaneo, 2020). Women are thus the ones most likely to be on the frontlines battling the pandemic and at increased risk of being infected due to lack of PPE adapted to female bodies (Smith *et al.*, 2021).

At home as well, women bear the brunt of the responsibility of the unpaid care work necessary for the reproduction of society. While women spend an average of four hours and 25 minutes a day engaged in unpaid care work globally, men spend the equivalent of one hour and 23 minutes (Pozzan and Cattaneo, 2020). With the temporary closure of schools and/or the introduction of remote learning associated with the pandemic, as well as the increase in the number of household members stuck at home because of stay-at-home orders, the care responsibilities of women have increased even further (Madgavkar *et al.*, 2020). Drawing on the language of "working a second shift", which Hochschild and Machung (2012) used to describe women's extra burden of reproductive work in the home, Chung (2020) has also alluded to the fact that women are engaged in "a third shift". She describes the work involved in this third shift as "ensuring the emotional wellbeing of not only…children but also parents and other family members. In other words, they are in charge of the mental load of worrying about the family." Once again, women are the ones saddled with the responsibility of easing the stress that family members are enduring as we all strive to cope with the numerous changes associated with the pandemic.

In the economic sector, gender differences in the impact of the pandemic have also come to light. Most studies focus on increased unemployment due to closure of workplaces in the formal sector. However, evidence has begun to emerge from countries with high levels of informal employment and predominance of micro- and small businesses as well. Based on a study of informal workers in 12 cities across the world including Accra, Dakar, Dar es Salaam, and Durban, conducted by the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing network, Ogando *et al*. (2021: 26) conclude that, "among men that reported increased unpaid care work, the differences between pre-COVID earnings and earnings between April and June 2020 were marginal. Among women, however, there is a clear association between an increase in care work and lower earnings." Azcona *et al*. (2020) predicted that, for every 100 men living in poverty globally, there would be 118 women. Ogando *et al*. (2021) are of the view that these gender differences will persist even as the full economic impact of the pandemic is felt in the years ahead, and that women, particularly those in the productive age in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, will be the hardest hit.

While the evidence shows that existing inequities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, often in the form of intersecting inequalities that aggravate the fallout differently among women and other marginalised groups (Al-Ali, 2020; Kabeer *et al*., 2021), less attention has been paid to the role of the state in addressing these inequalities, not just in the short term, but more fundamentally. This paper takes the gender analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic further by examining the gendered ramifications of the containment and mitigation measures adopted by two countries on the continent. Data were collected from secondary sources, such as newspaper articles, televised news, government reports, and research reports, as the pandemic evolved between May 2020 and December 2020, and governments designed and implemented new measures to deal with the outbreak. In analysing data from two neighbouring countries in West Africa, Burkina Faso and Ghana, we are making two points in this paper. First, we argue that the ripple effects of the containment measures in particular were gendered. Second, in the mitigation measures adopted to soften the impact of containment, the gendered nature of the state is evident in the nature of the policies adopted. In the choices of which social or economic sector to support and which not to support, the male-centric nature of the state is made evident. As a result, policies disadvantage women, and even more so poorer women.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, the rationale for choosing these two countries and the context in these two countries is laid out. This is followed by a gender analysis of the containment measures adopted by both countries, then a section outlining the gender inadequacies of the mitigation measures adopted by both countries. We return to the implications of these gender blind spots in the concluding section of the paper.

## Context

The major reason for choosing Burkina Faso and Ghana as our comparative units of analysis was that both countries were due to hold elections in 2020, the first year of the pandemic: Burkina Faso on 22 November and Ghana on 7 December. The immediacy of the elections and the potency of winning votes by getting COVID-19 responses right meant that political leaders had to tread more cautiously in the choices they made in response to the pandemic. In other words, while all countries on the continent sought to offer their citizens as favourable a welfare system as they could manage, given the extent of the crisis, countries like Burkina Faso and Ghana, which had impending elections, had a heightened responsibility to do so.

Burkina Faso and Ghana are neighbours in the West African sub-region, with Burkina Faso located to the north of Ghana. Although Ghana is considered a lower-middle-income country and Burkina Faso a low-income country, their economies are not significantly different. In both countries, the economies are largely informal, with only a minority of the working population in waged employment. In the rural areas, the majority of the population work in agriculture, producing largely food crops for household consumption, with the excess put on the market for sale. The International Labour Organization's (ILO) data from 2017 shows that the share of the labour force working in agriculture in Burkina Faso is 27,1% (as cited in Martin *et al.*, 2021). Agriculture is largely rain-fed and, being in the Sahel zone, rainfall patterns can be erratic, making it difficult to earn a decent income in the agricultural sector. The main agricultural export is cotton. According to the Burkinabe National Gender Policy, food production is largely the preserve of women, with 75% of the food produced for household consumption in the country being produced by women (JICA, 2013). Women are largely absent in the production of the export crop.

Ghana is as agrarian as Burkina Faso, with 28,4% of its labour force working in agriculture, according to the ILO's data from 2017 (as cited in Martin *et al*., 2021: 30). While Ghanaian agriculture is also largely rain-fed, the country's geographic location makes it less susceptible to poor rainfall patterns compared to its northern neighbour, Burkina Faso. Nonetheless, food crop farmers in Ghana are among the poorest groups in the country. In Ghana, the main agricultural export is cocoa. Half of the food produced for household consumption in Ghana is produced by women (Duncan, 2004). As in the case of Burkina Faso, fewer Ghanaian women are involved in the production of the major export crop.

The political contexts in Ghana and Burkina Faso are quite different. Unlike Burkina Faso, which has held only two democratic elections over the last 30 years, Ghana has held eight fairly peaceful democratic elections over the last three decades and earned itself the moniker of a beacon of democracy on the African continent (Obeng-Akrofi, 2020). On the economic front, the two countries are quite far apart. With a GDP per capita of US$857.93 as at 2020 (The World Bank, 2020a), Burkina Faso is considered a low-income country. Ghana, on the other hand, had a per capita GDP of US$2,205.53 in 2020 (The World Bank, 2020b) and is considered a lower- middle-income country. The differences in life chances are evident on the Human Development Index (HDI) rankings as well. Burkina Faso's HDI stood at 0,452 as at 2019, positioning it at 182 out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020a: 243). In the same year, Ghana's HDI stood at 0,611, positioning it at 138 out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020a: 243).

One marker of women's status in a country can be determined using the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report, the GII measures three dimensions of gender-based inequality: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. Reproductive health is measured by maternal mortality and adolescent birth rates; empowerment is measured by the share of parliamentary seats held by women, and attainment in secondary and higher education by each gender; and economic activity is measured by the labour market participation rate for women and men. The higher a country's GII value, the higher the inequality between women and men in terms of human development. Here again, the difference between Burkina Faso and Ghana is evident, although not as starkly as the economic differences. Based on data from the 2019 index, Burkina Faso has a GII value of 0,594. Only 13,4% of parliamentary seats are held by women in Burkina Faso. Twice as many men as women have completed secondary

school education in Burkina Faso – 6,1% of women versus 12,3% of men. Maternal mortality rates are quite high; for every 100,000 live births, 320 women die from pregnancy-related causes. Similarly, there is a fairly high adolescent birth rate; it stands at 104,3 births per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19. Finally, female participation in the labour market is 58,3% compared to 74,8% for men (UNDP, 2020b). On the face of it, Ghana does better than Burkina Faso on this measure. Its GII value is 0,538. Adolescent birth rates stand at 66,6 births per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19 (UNDP, 2020c). In terms of secondary school completion rates, the male to female ratio is 1,3 i.e., 8,7% of women versus 11,7% of men (UNICEF, 2021). The labour force participation rate is 63,6% for females compared to 71,9% for males (UNDP, 2020c). However, on other measures, the difference is small. The maternal mortality rate is not that different from Burkina Faso. For every 100,000 live births, 308 women die (UNDP, 2020c). With respect to the share of parliamentary seats held by women, Burkina Faso actually does slightly better than Ghana. As of 2019, 13,1% of these seats were held by women (Bauer and Darkwah, 2020: 105).

Yet another important marker of difference between Burkina Faso and Ghana that cannot be ignored in this discussion is the insecurity in Burkina Faso arising from terrorist attacks. Since 2015, the nation has been battling Islamist militants who, every so often, attack soldiers and civilians alike (Wilkins, 2021). This has led to a large number of internally displaced persons. In 2020, there were as many as 848,000 internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, and more than four-fifths (84%) were women and children (Wayack Pambè, Thorsen and Darkwah 2021: 16).

Prior to the pandemic, both countries were dealing with crises of different sorts. Working conditions were largely precarious, with only 12,7% of workers in Burkina Faso and 29,9% of Ghanaian workers engaged in jobs with formal contracts (Martin *et al.*, 2021: 13). In addition, only a third of Ghanaian workers were entitled to a pension. This was far better than the case in Burkina Faso where only 2,7% of its workers were entitled to a pension (Martin et *al.*, 2021: 13). In addition, as detailed in the OXFAM 2021 report (Martin *et al.*, 2021), the majority of the populations in both countries did not have access to universal healthcare (60% in Burkina Faso and 53% in Ghana).

This, then, was the prevailing context in 2020 when COVID-19 hit both countries. Burkina Faso identified its first case of Coronavirus on 9 March 2020, with Ghana following shortly thereafter on 12 March. The virus has spread quite differently in the two countries though. There are far more cases in Ghana than

there are in Burkina Faso. Data from the World Health Organization indicates that on 15 October 2020, roughly six months after the first cases were identified in both countries, Burkina Faso had a total of 2,294 confirmed cases (109,7 cases per 100,000 persons) while Ghana had had a much higher total of 47,126 confirmed cases (1516.6 cases per 100,000 persons). Ghana experienced its first peak of COVID-19 in July/August 2020 and a second peak in January/February 2021, while Burkina Faso experienced its first peak much later on, in December 2020. Even then, by April 2021 the total number of confirmed cases in Burkina Faso had only risen to 13,114, while Ghana had recorded seven times more confirmed cases, with a total of 91,663 cases (WHO, 2020a; WHO, 2020b). Given the rather large disparity in cases and the different timelines, the nature of containment measures in the two countries differed quite a bit. Nonetheless, in both countries, as will be described more fully in the next two sections, the governments responded rather swiftly to the identification of the virus outbreak, first with a series of containment measures and eventually mitigation measures as well.

## Containment Measures

Many of the early containment measures drew on a biomedical disease model and focused on measures to contain the pathogen and prevent its spread. This was particularly important given that the existing healthcare infrastructure in both countries could not contain massive numbers of people requiring hospitalisation as was the case in Europe and North America. Burkina Faso's healthcare infrastructure was worse than Ghana's. In 2018, Burkina Faso had one doctor to 12,000 persons and one nurse to 2,419 persons (INSD, 2015). Ghana fared better but its situation was no less dire. In 2017, it had one doctor to 8,431 persons and one nurse to 627 persons (Ghana Health Service, 2017). These statistics mask locational differences. In both countries, rural populations have less access to healthcare personnel than urban populations do.

Both countries sought to put in place public health measures to test, trace, and contain the spread of the virus. Burkina Faso's public health provision was far more low-key than that of Ghana. One hospital centre in a suburb of Ouagadougou was set aside as the centre at which COVID-19 patients would be isolated. Testing kits were made available, but they were too few to combat a full-blown pandemic. Al Jazeera reported that, a couple of days after Burkina Faso had identified its first case, only 400 COVID testing kits were available and only three health centres

across the entire country were able to carry out the requisite tests (Wilkins, 2020). Eventually, regional donors such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Monetary and Economic Union (UEMOA), as well as other international donors, including the World Health Organization, the Republic of China, Plan International, and Doctors Without Borders, provided funding through the National Health Emergency Response Operations Centre (CORUS) to set up more laboratories that could test for the virus and to supply PPE to healthcare professionals (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2021).

The Ghanaian government, in partnership with the private sector and international donors, rolled out a more comprehensive set of public health measures. Testing was initially available at the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, the Kumasi Centre for Collaborative Research, and the Public Health Reference Laboratory at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital. Over time, a network of private facilities set up testing centres in, particularly, the Greater Accra Region where the largest number of cases were identified. The private sector was also instrumental in the creation of isolation centres for COVID-19 patients. While initially a section of one hospital was set aside for COVID-19 patients, a group of ten Ghanaian businessmen and women set up a private sector fund (ghanacovid19fund.com) which aimed to raise GHC100,000,000 (approximately US$15,500,000) to pursue its mission which was "To provide a prompt response to the hardship and suffering arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic". A major goal of the fund was to construct a 100-bed Infectious Disease and Isolation Centre as well as a 21-bed intensive care unit and a biomedical laboratory at the Ga East Municipal Hospital. The fund delivered on its promise and the centre, built over a 100-day period, was inaugurated by the Vice President of the Republic of Ghana on 25 July 2020 (My Joy Online, 2020).

A major goal of the Ghanaian government in its roll out of public health measures to address the pandemic focused on increasing the medical staff to population ratio. A total of 65,000 health professionals (Ghana Web, 2020a), mostly previously unemployed nurses, were recruited to improve the healthcare-worker-to-patient ratio. These included community health nurses who were employed for contact tracing purposes. To ensure consistency and quality in the healthcare services, 7,000 healthcare workers were designated as frontline workers, who were likely to come into contact with the COVID-19 patients (Petetsi, 2020). Acknowledging the heightened risk of contamination, these frontline workers were offered incentives, such as insurance coverage for all of them, tax exemptions first for three months

and then another three, amounting to a total cost to the state of GHC174,000,000 (approximately US$30,000,000) (Ghana Web, 2020b) as well as a 50% increase in basic salary for any frontline worker who came into contact with a COVID-19 patient.

Beyond the public health measures, both countries instituted a series of proactive containment measures, by decree and emergency policy decision-making. These included almost immediate closures of the air, sea and land borders. Ghana's air borders were reopened on 1 September 2020 (Laudbusiness.com, 2020) while its land and sea borders remain closed (CNN Travel, 2021). Similarly, Burkina Faso closed all external borders. As with Ghana, the land borders in Burkina Faso and indeed across the West African subregion officially remained closed until 1 January 2022 (Okafor, 2021). Schools were also closed, with Ghana closing the schools on 16 March 2020 (BBC News | Pidgin, 2020), four days after the first case was identified, and Burkina Faso closing schools on 15 March 2020, six days after its first case. However, while Burkina Faso reopened its schools in October 2020 (ACAPS, 2021), Ghana did not reopen its schools until January 2021 (BBC News | Pidgin, 2021). The only exception in both countries was for final year students at both junior and senior high school level who were allowed to return to school to finish their secondary school completion examinations in June 2020. In Burkina Faso, the school closures compounded a pre-existing problem: the situation where schools had been closed because of the Islamic terrorists. Finally, COVID-19 containment prompted partial lockdowns in both countries. In Ghana, stay-at-home orders were imposed for three weeks (from 27 March to 19 April 2020) but only in the capital city of Accra and its environs of Tema and Kasoa as well as Kumasi, the second largest city in the country (Crisis24, 2020a). In Burkina Faso, a nationwide curfew from 7pm to 5am was imposed on 21 March 2020, and cities with confirmed cases of COVID-19 were quarantined from 26 March 2020 by banning the movement of people in and out of these cities (SIG, 2021). Additionally, markets were ordered to close from 26 March to 19 April 2020. The night curfew lasted ten weeks but, from 20 April to 2 June 2020, the time period for the curfew was readjusted to between 9pm and 4am (Crisis24, 2020b), just in time for Ramadan.

Another containment measure that both countries adopted drew inspiration from the WHO recommendations for increased attention to hygiene, distancing, and face masks. Both countries began a near immediate campaign for handwashing which was supported by innovations in handwashing facilities in both countries. By April 2020, Burkina Faso had mandated the wearing of face masks in public

spaces. In Ghana, the state went as far as enacting a law, E.I. 164 No 10, which was signed and gazetted on 15 June 2020. E.I. 164 mandated the wearing of face coverings, be it masks or shields, for individuals in public spaces. The penalty for failing to comply with this law is a fine of not less than GHC12,000 (US$2,000) and not more than GHC60,000 (US$10,000) and/ or imprisonment of not less than four years and not more than 10 years (Hawkson, 2020).

## Gender Blind Spots in The Containment Measures

In line with Smith's (2019) observations of global outbreak responses being focused primarily on biomedical needs, early COVID-19 responses and policies in Burkina Faso and Ghana did not consider the potential ramifications of these measures on different population groups. However, on the African continent, regional cross-border trade is a quintessential female activity, particularly when orientated towards food and low-value goods for retail and small-scale wholesale trade (Mbo'o-Tchouawou *et al.*, 2016). Koroma *et al.* (2017: 1) estimate that 70% of informal cross-border traders on the continent are women. Thus, in Burkina Faso and Ghana, the immediate closure of borders disproportionately affected women, whose trading activities involve their presence as buyers, during transport, and at selling points. While some may avoid trading altogether, others continue the trade clandestinely, but have to contend with the increased bribery and harassment from border officials. The continued closure of land borders is a drain on the finances of these women, be they Burkinabe or Ghanaian, and has thus eroded the viability of their businesses. In Ghana, protests have been held at both the Ghana-Togo (Crisis24, 2021) and Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire borders (AFP News, 2021) to no avail. The governments' disregard for the impact of these new trade barriers on female traders contradicts the economic importance of this trade elsewhere in West Africa; a study carried out by UN Women notes that in Benin, Chad and Mali, women's informal cross-border trade generated 40% to 60% of the value added in trade to the GDP in the 2000s (Doss *et al.*, 2020: 45).

Analysing the gendered effects of the partial lockdown and market closures reveals that, again, women were disproportionately affected, and especially those who make a living from trade in foodstuffs or consumer items or from casual porter work in marketplaces. During the lockdown and closure period, these women could not sell their goods and had to contend with spoilage as well. Casual workers lost access to work. For many of these women, who rely on daily sales and small jobs to eke out a living, the temporary closures of the markets were a real financial burden,

as it meant the loss of daily income. Their vulnerability was, perhaps, most starkly evident in the story of a number of head porters from northern Ghana who, on the night the lockdown was announced, attempted to travel back home due to their inability to afford accommodation and meals if they had to stay in Accra for three weeks without working (Kotoka, 2020). In Burkina Faso, the association of market traders mobilised demonstrations against the market closures and pressured the authorities to reopen markets earlier than planned (Kabore, 2020). This difference in citizens' leverage against authorities is likely to be linked with the relative power of authorities and with concerns about pleasing powerful constituents ahead of the elections. The Burkinabe government was already under much pressure in 2020 compared to the incumbent president of Ghana. However, for the women running micro- and small businesses, market closures were not the only impediment. As mentioned earlier, they shouldered additional work in the second shift as well as the third shift, which further eroded their ability to maintain their trading activities.

Finally, we examine the gendered impact of the long period of school closures and its potential impact on girls' education, although the full impact of this is only going to be fully appreciated in the long term. Globally, concerns have been raised over increasing rates of girls dropping out of school due to child marriage or teenage pregnancy. World Vision International predicts that as many as one million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa may lose their chance to complete school as a result of the lockdowns (World Vision Ghana, 2020) and, one might add, the extended school closures. In Burkina Faso, girls' education is already devalued, with only 6,1% of women having completed secondary school education. Moreover, the incidence of child marriage is very high and has stayed fairly stagnant over the last two decades (Fatusi *et al.*, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, 51,3% of young women aged 20–24 years in 2014 were married by the age of 18 and the rate was even higher in rural areas (Wayack Pambè *et al.*, 2021: 25). However, the evidence from Burkina Faso and Ghana so far does not point to an increase in child marriages as a result of the pandemic. The issue of teenage pregnancies during school closures is linked with concerns about girls having far more contact with boys and men in unsupervised contexts than would have been the case if they were in school; this is believed to increase their risk of engaging in unsafe sexual practices. Early evidence from Ghana suggests that these predictions are not true. The teen pregnancy rate figure has hovered around 11% over the last five years, with no statistically significant change in 2021 (Citi Newsroom, 2021). The bigger issue, we argue, is not tied to marriage

and sex, as implied by international donors, but rather to schooling not being perceived as a valuable option for all girls; this may affect girls' return to education after lengthy closures in the same numbers as they were prior to the pandemic.

## Mitigation Measures

The variety of containment measures adopted in both Burkina Faso and Ghana had nationwide fallouts. Gallup's worldwide poll of one thousand individuals in each country found that, in Burkina Faso, 71% of workers stopped working temporarily while in Ghana, the equivalent figure was 60% (Ray, 2021). Prior to COVID-19, the income GINI coefficient based on the latest household surveys stood at 0.435 for Ghana and 0.353 for Burkina Faso (Martin *et al.*, 2021: 8). Another measure of inequality, the Palma Ratio, also demonstrates the higher level of inequality in Ghana as opposed to Burkina Faso. The Palma Ratio, which measures the ratio of the richest ten per cent of the population's share of national income divided by the poorest 40%'s share stood at 2.25 for Ghana and 1.48 for Burkina Faso (Martin *et al.*, 2021: 8). All major international organisations, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, predict that the pandemic will worsen both inequality and poverty. In fact, the World Bank predicts that 51 million more people in Sub-Saharan Africa will be driven into extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic (Lakner *et al.*, 2021). In 2030, Kharas and Dooley (2021: 5) estimate that nine of the ten countries with the largest numbers of individuals living in extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic will be found on the African continent. Burkina Faso will be one of these nine, with an estimated 2,3 million more of its peoples living in extreme poverty.

At the national level, the price of food and consumer goods increased in both countries and, given that a large segment of the population experienced a decrease in income during this period, this had an adverse impact on food consumption. In Ghana, for example, 77,7% of the population faced lower incomes and just over half the population reduced their food consumption (GSS, 2020a). In Burkina Faso, the economic fallout of the pandemic, coupled with the insurgency, led to a situation where nearly five per cent of the population (954,000 persons) needed nutritional assistance (Wayack Pambè *et al.*, 2021: 16). A quarter of Burkinabe respondents who participated in the RECOVR survey had also either reduced their portion sizes or skipped a meal in the week prior to participating in the survey (Warren *et al.*, 2020).

Given the widespread negative short-term impact of the pandemic, it was imperative that governments adopt a range of mitigation measures to cushion its impact on their citizens. These mitigation measures focused on three areas, namely, subventions to ease the immediate financial burdens of citizens, measures to address schooling deficits, and assistance to businesses.

The subventions provided to ease the financial burdens that the pandemic had wrought were fairly similar across both countries. It comprised mostly water and electricity subsidies as well as cash transfers. The Ghanaian government subsidised the provision of electricity from April 2020 to the end of September 2020, while water was provided free till the end of December 2020. Given that many more households have access to electricity than to water, the majority of the Ghanaian population enjoyed the electricity subvention and not the water subvention; 75% compared to 22% of the population (GSS, 2020b: 1). Similarly, the government of Burkina Faso introduced subsidies for water and electricity, but only for three months. In contrast to Ghana, the subsidy was means-based; low consumption households were exempted from paying bills for three months, while the medium consumption households were offered a 50% rebate on their bills. However, as with Ghana, there was poor access. In the Burkinabe case, as many as 93.5% of households in urban areas had access to pipe-borne water in their houses, compounds or nearby communal taps (Dos Santos and Wayack Pambè, 2016). However, water supply to these taps was erratic, especially during the dry season months of March to June, which coincided with the period when the subsidy was being offered. Poor supply of pipe-borne water meant that the subsidy was of little benefit to most people. Neither was an attempt made to distribute water in the communities where pipe-borne water was not available

In both Burkina Faso and Ghana, cash transfer programmes were delivered on a means-based basis prior to the pandemic. The Burkina Naong-Sa Ya programme (end of misery in Burkina Faso) has been in existence since 2014. It provides a monthly cash transfer of around 10,000 Fcfa (US$17) to roughly 20,000 beneficiaries. In the months of May, June and July 2020, the programme doubled the number of beneficiaries (Wayack Pambè *et al.*, 2021: 22). Similarly, Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme, which has run since 2018, targets a wide range of vulnerable individuals including poor and destitute families; guardians of orphaned and vulnerable children; persons with severe disability; destitute pregnant women; and elderly persons over 65 years of age. Although the

programme has run for a shorter time than in Burkina Faso, it targets many more people – 332,000 households across the country. However, the monthly amounts transferred are rather small, ranging from GHC32 per person to GHC106 per a family of four or more (US$5,30 to US$17,80) (Ghana News Agency, 2020). During the pandemic, efforts were made to pay the monies, which had been doubled, in advance instead of in arrears. so as to offset the rising cost of living associated with the pandemic. Beneficiaries were also paid an additional sum of GHC10 (US$1,75) to enable them to purchase PPE. Finally, transfers were made using a digital platform to ease access and maintain health safety during the pandemic. However, given the digital divide in Ghana, where only 34% of women, compared to 44% of men, had mobile accounts in 2017, this new payment system would have disadvantaged female recipients (Dadzie and Raju, 2020).

The swift closure of schools left absolutely no time for planning for educational continuity for the school-aged population. Burkina Faso's Ministry of National Education, Literacy and Promotion of National Languages was only able to put together a response plan one month after schools were closed. This action plan hinged rather ambitiously on the production of digital teaching resources which were going to be made available to students through both traditional and new media sources. Similarly, Ghana's Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service focused on the creation of educational content which was going to be made available in 30 minutes of repeated segments on both television and radio.

Finally, mitigation measures were designed to soften the fallout of containment measures on small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The Burkinabe government issued an array of fiscal measures to support businesses. This included waiving the collection of various taxes and the suspension or remission of penalties. In addition, the government bore the operating costs of the markets, secured stocks of consumer goods (sugar, milk, rice, oil, soap, etc.) and tightened price controls throughout the country to ensure that goods remained affordable in the midst of the pandemic. The government also announced a business support scheme, the *Fonds de relance économique* (FRE-COVID-19) of 100 billion FCFA (roughly US$200 million) in April 2020. However, unlike Ghana, where the business support scheme was rolled out pretty quickly, it took six months in the Burkinabe case for the details of the fund to be made public (Mano, 2020). As with Ghana's Coronavirus Alleviation Programme Business Support Scheme (CAP BuSS), discussed below, the FRE-COVID-19 scheme in Burkina only supports businesses that are formally

registered, a rule that disadvantages informal business owners who, in Burkina Faso, as in Ghana, comprise the majority of female workers. Ghana developed two schemes. First was the CAP BuSS which was funded by both the state and partner banks to the tune of GHC1 billion (approximately US$150 million) (Gold Street Business, 2020). This aimed to support SMEs through loan schemes with a one-year moratorium and a two-year reimbursement period. The second scheme was the Coronavirus Alleviation and Revitalisation of Enterprises Support (CARES) which was focused on building back after the pandemic. There are two parts to the programme: a stabilisation programme that was to run until December 2020 and a revitalisation project that is to last through 2023. The revitalisation project is designed to engender structural transformation in Ghana's economy, including the promotion of the local agri-food systems. This component focuses on four areas: supporting commercial farming, attracting educated youth into the agricultural sector, developing and promoting agro- and food processing, and finally, optimising the sector's flagship programmes, which are Planting for Food and Jobs, and Rearing for Food and Jobs. Five products are given particular attention: rice, poultry, cassava, sugar, and tomatoes. These are all imported in huge amounts. No specific measures were designed to revitalise existing small-scale businesses specialising in small-scale processing and local markets, of which the majority are run by women.

Overall, in the development of these mitigation measures, governments worked with very broad and inclusive definitions of which categories of individuals were deemed vulnerable. As a result, the measures ended up not always supporting those most in need. Other policies designed to address the economic fallout of the containment measures inadvertently disadvantaged women because they focused on a segment of the working population that was disproportionately male.

## Gender Blind Spots in Mitigation Measures

As has been previously mentioned, financial subsidies were created in order to ease the costs that ordinary people had to bear due to the imposition of stay-at-home orders and the demands for increased hygiene. A scrutiny of the effect of those costs shows that there were clear differences in who had access to both the electricity and water subventions. Gender, wealth, and location came into play. In Ghana, male-headed households in the South were far more likely to afford housing with piped water and appliances using electricity than female-headed households in the northern part of Ghana (Oduro and Tsikata, 2020). A similar picture emerged in

Burkina Faso, where only 9,2% of female-headed households had access to electricity in 2016 compared to 42,6% of male-headed households. The lack of electrification in rural areas resulted in significant inequality, with only 27,7% of rural households having access to electricity compared to 75,3% of urban households (MINEFID, 2017). Although household wealth depends on the number of economically active persons and the pooling or non-pooling arrangements, the differences in wealth must be seen in light of the type of employment and self-employment men and women have respectively, and of earning potential in different regions of the country. Infrastructural problems also meant that Burkinabe women and girls, particularly those living in the rural parts of the country, continued to be saddled with the burden and drudgery of procuring water for their households even as pipe-borne water was made available to the elite in urban households for free.

It is clear, from close interrogation of the measures designed to mitigate the educational implications of school closures, that little attention was paid to gender. As already discussed, the evidence so far does not point to a decrease in girls' attendance at school due to either teen pregnancy or child marriage. In terms of performance, however, gendered educational outcomes are likely to be seen far into the future. While many countries, including Ghana and Burkina Faso, sought to minimise the negative impact of school closures by offering alternatives on either radio or the internet, several factors intersected to expand the educational gap further and wider in both countries. Rural children were at a disadvantage with regard to access to electricity and the required appliances for remote learning. Poverty further aggravated this inequality, implying that children in poor households were even more unlikely to access remote learning if the household head was female than if the head was male. Previous experience shows that girls who are at home are burdened with house chores and care work (Acosta and Evans, 2020). Their ability to devote full attention to their schoolwork is diminished, and more so for girls living in households with intermittent access to water and labour-saving appliances. This has implications for how well they will do in school in the long term, the data for which does not yet exist.

The business support schemes implemented by both governments reveal significant gender differences. This is as true in Burkina Faso as it is in Ghana. In Ghana, the CAP BuSS programme was initially criticised for its inattention to gender differences in the population of business owners and their requisite needs for support. Oduro and Tsikata (2020: 37) pointed to the fact that some of the eligibility criteria

undermined the extent to which this programme could be favourable to women's businesses. First, self-employed business owners without employees were not eligible for the loans. Far more women (55,7%) than men (42.4%) are in this category of employment (Tsikata and Darkwah, 2019: 122) and are thus automatically cut off from the scheme. Secondly, applicants need to demonstrate the vulnerability of their business by opening up their books to the government agency disbursing the funds. This is a tall order for the majority of Ghanaian women business owners who are simply eking out a living and do not have the technical know-how or finances to pay for the services of an accountant or bookkeeper to help them with their records. The same critiques can be raised of business-oriented mitigation measures issued in Burkina Faso, where most fiscal measures were unlikely to benefit informal traders. Despite the negligible attention to female traders in the policy design, the implementation was more gender responsive, at least in Ghana. The disbursers of the CAP BuSS fund made a great effort to ensure that women business owners were able to access the loans. As at the end of December 2020, approximately GHC412,88 million had been disbursed to support 277,511 businesses. Sixty-nine per cent of the beneficiaries were female (GoG, 2021: 77). This is especially important, given the rather high levels of Ghanaian female entrepreneurship. In 2020, the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs ranked the Ghanaian economy as one of three with the leading number of women entrepreneurs (Mastercard, 2021). The effect of recovery measures is not yet documented. However, a critical evaluation of the revitalisation component of the Ghana CARES programme exposes a gender-blind design. The revitalisation programme focuses on commercial large-scale farming and the industrialised high-end processing component of the agricultural value chain, with no attention to the distribution end of the agri-food value chain. In a country where nearly 30% (29.1%) of women compared to seven per cent of men work as market traders (Baah-Boateng and Vanek, 2020), it is dismaying that female small-scale traders, who are the ones largely responsible for the distribution of agro-food products, have not been targeted specifically in the strategies for building back better.

A glaring blind spot in the mitigation measures of both the Burkinabe and Ghanaian governments was the complete silence on domestic violence. Much of the attention focused on economic vulnerability and educational fallouts without adequate attention to domestic violence. Even though Ghana and Burkina Faso do not have large statistical evidence of their own, there has been documentation

of the increase in domestic violence in other parts of the world (Hsu and Henke, 2021), leading Evans *et al.* (2020: 2302) to call it "a pandemic within a pandemic." There is no reason why we should expect a different story in Ghana or Burkina Faso. The small sample surveys and qualitative evidence in both places also point to an increase in domestic violence. In a study of 187 Burkinabe women, Dalla and Snorek (2020: 18) noted that there was an increase in the rate of gender-based violence from 10,16% to 15,51% after the pandemic.

In Ghana, interviews with a number of non-state actors involved in Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) work pointed to the reality of being locked down with one's abuser during the three-week lockdown in the Greater Accra Region. Interviews conducted by FIDA/OSIWA Ghana (2020: 21) revealed the inadequacies of the containment measures that made no room for operating protection services for survivors of violence during the lockdowns. Social workers from organisations working with SGBV were not considered essential or critical workers and were thus not exempted from the lockdowns. In fact, the Ghanaian government made little to no effort to address domestic violence during the height of the pandemic. Instead, it was the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that stepped up to the plate. In partnership with the Domestic Violence Victims Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service, they set up a hotline for survivors (UNFPA, 2020a). A telecommunications company, Vodafone Ghana, also provided support to the oldest shelter for women in Ghana, the Ark Foundation. They refurbished part of the Foundation's facilities so it could serve as a first point of contact and isolation for survivors with COVID prior to resettlement at the shelter (Ampomah, 2020). Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the government had been completely silent on domestic violence matters (Wayack Pambè *et al.*, 2021: 26). Just as in the Ghanaian case, the UNFPA rose to the challenge. Already working on these matters due to the conflict and insecurity in Burkina Faso over the last seven years, this institution increased its funding for gender-based violence programmes due to a fear that the night curfews imposed as part of the containment measures, and rising food prices in spite of the government's efforts to forestall that, would increase the risk of violence (UNFPA, 2020b).

## Conclusion

This article explored the gendered impacts of the containment and mitigation measures adopted in two countries. While most studies have examined the broader impacts on paid and unpaid work, income levels, health, and education, our analysis centred on unpacking gendered outcomes among ordinary citizens of specific measures and how they intersected with wealth and regional inequalities. Although there was a preoccupation with biomedical needs, public health, and healthcare infrastructure early in the pandemic, the pandemic was not just a health crisis; it was also a socio-economic crisis. We focused on the social and economic effects of the proactive containment measures and subsequent mitigation policies because these laid bare the gender differentiation in our societies, highlighting the importance of the age-old arguments made for concerted efforts at gender equality and equity. Closures – from national borders, to markets and other workplaces, educational spaces, and social spaces outside homes – affected women disproportionately and long term. Instant changes to the burden of domestic chores and care work impacted women's immediate income with the worries and needs for planning that come along with managing. However, the extended closures of borders damaged trade networks, thus directly affecting the vast numbers of female traders involved in informal cross-border trade. The ripple effects of the reduced movements of goods along the trading networks struck the many women eking out a living from small-scale retail sale in local markets. For children and young people in education, school closures instantly gave them time on their hands to take on work at home and/or to spend on social activities when not restricted by lockdowns or curfews. While extended school closures eroded the academic progress of both boys and girls, they increased risk for girls of perpetuating gender norms that do not favour education as a good option for girls.

In our case study countries, the failure to recognise that the fallout from rapid outbreak responses is gendered and happens in different tempos was further exacerbated in the design of mitigation measures. In spite of prior programmes to increase women's empowerment and participation, girls' schooling, and so forth, a gender-responsive approach was not applied to policy and programming. Measures to alleviate hardship immediately ignored existing inequalities, except for those targeting the most destitute. Thus, without paying attention to the many families living in poorer neighbourhoods in cities or in rural areas, subsidies to support stay-at-home orders pandered to urban voters and did little to relieve women of the

increased burden of domestic work or the effects of the instantaneous reduction in their income. Remote learning strategies to ensure continuity in education exacerbated the marginalisation of rural children, who could not access lessons, and put further at peril the girls whose place at school was not a given.

Neither country implemented measures targeted specifically at women or girls to preserve or ameliorate their economic and social positions. The attack on the advancement of gender equity goals is also evident in the business recovery plans. By focusing on the formalisation of businesses, businesses of a size large enough to create employment, and on the expansion of industrialised value chains, the parts of the economy occupied by female entrepreneurs and small-scale traders are neglected. The short-term nature of these measures, including, in the case of Ghana, the introduction of a bevy of taxes and price hikes, are unlikely to address the fundamental structural deficiencies in our economies that create gendered economic outcomes. In unpacking the gendered ramifications of mitigation and recovery policies, the male-centric nature of the state is highlighted and the need for an alternative approach to economic policy-making made more evident.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge funding from INCLUDE, Netherlands, which supported the data collection that serves as the basis of the analysis in this paper.

## References

Acosta, Amina M. and Evans, David. 2020. "COVID-19 and Girls' Education: What We Know So Far and What We Expect." *Center for Global Development*, 2 October. Available at https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen

ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project). 2021. "COVID-19: Insecurity and education in Burkina Faso." Thematic series on education – October 2020. Geneva: ACAPS. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20201015_acaps_thematic_series_on_education_burkina_faso.pdf

AFP News. 2021. "Ghana traders protest closures as Covid measures bite." *Agence France-Press*, 2 September. Available at https://www.barrons.com/news/ghana-traders-protest-border-closures-as-covid-measures-bite-01630607408

Al-Ali, N. 2020. "Covid-19 and feminism in the Global South: Challenges, initiatives and dilemmas", European Journal of Women's Studies 27: 333–47.

Amnesty International. 2021. Amnesty International's Report 2020/2021 – Burkina Faso. Available at https://www.amnesty.org/fr/countries/africa/burkina-faso/

Ampomah, Eunice H. 2020. "Vodafone Provides Ark Foundation with Shelter for Domestic Violence Victims." *Ghana News Agency*, 9 October. Available at https://www.gna.org.gh/1.18929124

Azcona, Ginette et al. 2020. *From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19*. New York, NY: UN Women. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-COVID-19-en.pdf

Baah-Boateng, William and Vanek, Joann. 2020. "Informal Workers in Ghana: A Statistical Snapshot", *WIEGO Statistical Brief No. 21*. Manchester, UK: WIEGO.

Bauer, Gretchen and Darkwah, Akosua K. 2020. "We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians: women and political office in Ghana", *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 3 (1):101–119.

BBC News | Pidgin. 2020. "Coronavirus – Virus: Ghana schools closed, religious, sports activities chop ban to fight Covid-19 disease." *BBC*, 16 March. Available at https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-51904164

BBC News | Pidgin. 2021. "Re-opening date for schools in Ghana: Students go back to classroom after 9 month Covid-19 shutdown - Dis be what you for know." *BBC*, 4 January. Available at https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-55530001

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. 2021. *Committed Grants Database*. Available at https://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2018/11/OPP1199135

Chung, Heejung. 2020. "Return of the 1950s Housewife? How to Stop Coronavirus Lockdown Reinforcing Sexist Gender Roles." *The Conversation*, March 30. Available at https://theconversation.com/return-of-the-1950s-housewife-how-to-stop-coronavirus-lockdown-reinforcing-sexist-gender-roles-134851.

Citi Newsroom. 2021. "Teenage pregnancies in Ghana hit 555,575 in five years." *CNR*, 25 June. Available at https://citinewsroom.com/2021/06/teenage-pregnancies-in-ghana-hit-555575-in-five-years/

CNN Travel. 2022. "Travelling to Ghana during Covid-19: What you need to know before you go." *Cable News Network*, 1 March. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/ghana-travel-covid-19/index.html

Crisis24. 2020a. "Ghana: Authorities impose lockdown on two regions due to COVID-19 from March 30 /update 3." *Crisis24*, 28 March. Available at https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/risk-alerts/979npwgshqgzxmjji/ghana-authorities-impose-lockdown-on-two-regions-due-to-covid-19-from-march-30-update-3

Crisis24. 2020b. "Burkina Faso: Authorities ease lockdown measures May 4 /update 7." *Crisis24*, 5 May. Available at https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/risk-alerts/ayjcpmtqx2ejpxpfb/burkina-faso-authorities-ease-lockdown-measures-may-4-update-7

Crisis24. 2021. "Ghana: Community to protest COVID-19-related border closure in Aflao, Volta Region, Aug. 27." *Crisis24*, 25 August. Available at https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/risk-alerts/wip1001313531/ghana-community-to-protest-covid-19-related-border-closure-in-aflao-volta-region-aug-27

Dalla, Ousmane and Snorek, Julie L. 2020. *Analyse rapide de l'impact de la pandémie liée au COVID-19 sur les violences faites aux femmes et aux filles au Sahel*. Bronx, NY: Justice and Dignity for the Women of Sahel.

Dadzie, Christabel E. and Dhushyanth, Raju. 2020. "Economic Relief Through Social Safety Nets During the Covid-19 Crisis: The Case of Ghana." *World Bank Blogs*, 26 October. Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/economic-relief-through-social-safety-nets-during-covid-19-crisis-case-ghana

Dos Santos, Stéphanie and Wayack Pambè, Madeleine. 2016. "Les Objectifs du Millénaire pour le développement, l'accès à l'eau et les rapports de genre", *Mondes en développement* 2: 63–78.

Doss, Cheryl et al. 2020. "The potential intersections of Covid-19, gender and food security in Africa", *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security* 5: 41–48.

Duncan, Beatrice A. 2004. *Women in Agriculture in Ghana*. Accra: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Evans, Megan L. et al. 2020. "A Pandemic Within a Pandemic – Intimate Partner Violence During Covid-19", *New England Journal of Medicine* 383 (24): 2302–2304.

Fatusi, Adesegun O. et al., 2021. "Trends and correlates of girl-child marriage in 11 West African countries: evidence from recent Demographic and Health Surveys", *AAS Open Research* 4: 35–35.

FIDA/OSIWA Ghana. 2020. *Women and Girls in Emergency (WAGE) during the COVID-19 lockdown in Ghana – Access to help for GBV victims*. Accra: International Federation of Women Lawyers and Open Society for West Africa.

Ghana Health Service (GHS). 2017. *The Health Sector in Ghana – Facts and Figures 2017*. Accra: Ghana Health Service. Available at https://thinknovate.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FACTSFIGURES_2017.pdf

Ghana News Agency. 2020. "LEAP beneficiaries receive double payment to cushion them against corona virus pandemic." *GhanaWeb*, 23 June. Available at https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/LEAP-beneficiaries-receive-double-payment-to-cushion-them-against-coronavirus-pandemic-988027

GhanaWeb. 2020a. "Coronavirus: We've recruited 65,000 new health personnel – Dr Bawumia." *GhanaWeb*, 25 July. Available at https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Coronavirus-We-ve-recruited-65-000-new-health-personnel-Dr-Bawumia-1016506

GhanaWeb. 2020b. "Parliament approves GH¢174m tax-free income for front line health workers." *GhanaWeb*, 16 August. Available at https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Parliament-approves-GH-174m-tax-free-income-for-front-line-health-workers-1034014

Global Heath 5050. 2021. *The COVID-19 Sex-Disaggregated Data Tracker.* Available at https://globalhealth5050.org/the-sex-gender-and-covid-19-project/the-data-tracker/

Gold Street Business. 2020. "102,361 Applicants Benefit From GH¢1bn Stimulus Package." *GhanaWeb,* 10 August. Available at https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/102-361-applicants-benefit-from-GH-1bn-stimulus-package-1029637

Government of Ghana. 2021. *The Budget Statement and Economic Policy of the Government of Ghana for the 2021 Financial Year*. Accra: Ministry of Finance.

GSS. 2020a. *Brief on COVID-19 Households and Jobs Tracker Wave 1*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

GSS. 2020b. *Brief on COVID-19 Local Economies Tracker Wave 1*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

Hawkson, Emmanuel E. 2020. Graphic Online. "Failing to wear face mask can land you 10 years in prison or Ghc 60,000 fine." Available at https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/failing-to-wear-face-mask-can-land-you-10-years-in-prison.html

Hochschild, Arlie R. and Machung, Anne. 2012. *The Second Shift: Working Families and The Revolution at Home*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Hsu, Lin-chi and Henke, Alexander. 2021. "The Effect of Sheltering in Place on Police Reports of Domestic Violence in the US", *Feminist Economics* 27 (1-2): 362–379.

INSD. 2015. *Enquête multisectorielle continue (EMC) 2014: Profil de pauvreté et d'inégalités*. Ouagadougou: Institut National de la Statistique et Démographie – Ministère de l'économieet des finances.

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2013. *Country Gender Profile: Burkina Faso*. Available at https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/thematic_issues/gender/background/c8h0vm0000anjqj6-att/burkinafaso_2013.pdf

Kabeer, Naila et al. 2021. "Feminist economic perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic", *Feminist Economics* 27 (1-2): 1–29.

Kabore, Jules. 2020. "COVID-19 in Burkina Faso: Traders demand the opening of the Dassasgho market." *Burkina24*, 28 April. Available at https://www.burkina24.com/2020/04/28/covid-19-au-burkina-faso-des-commercants-reclament-louverture-du-marche-de-dassasgho/

Kharas, Homi and Dooley, Meagan. 2021. *Extreme Poverty in the Time of COVID-19*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Koroma, Suffyan et al. 2017. *Formalization of informal trade in Africa: Trends, experiences and socio-economic impacts*. Accra: FAO.

Kotoka, Emmanuel. 2020. "Dr. Bawumia Gifts Stranded Head Porters (Kayayoos) GH¢500 Each." *Adepa News.com*, 1 April. Available at https://adepanews.com/dr-bawumia-gifts-stranded-head-porterskayayoos-gh%C2%A2500-each/

Lakner, Christoph et al. 2021. "Updated Estimates of The Impact of Covid-19 On Global Poverty: Looking Back At 2020 And the Outlook For 2021." *World Bank Blogs*, 11 January. Available at https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021

Laudbusiness.com. 2020. "Coronavirus: Borders, beaches and pubs remain closed – Akufo-Addo." *GhanaWeb*, 16 August. Available at https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Coronavirus-Borders-beaches-and pubs-remain-closed-Akufo-Addo-1035343

Madgavkar, Anu et al. "2020. COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects." *McKinsey & Company*, 15 July. Available

at https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects

Mano, Valentin. 2020. "FRE Covid-19: Comment bénéficier du fonds." *Bizya Africa*, 21 September. Available at: https://biznesskibaya.com/blog/2020/09/21/fre-covid-19-comment-beneficier-du-fonds/

Martin, Matthew et al. 2021. *The West Africa Inequality Crisis: Fighting Austerity and the Pandemic*. Oxfam GB: Oxfam International. Available at https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621300/rr-west-africa-cri-austerity-pandemic-141021-en.pdf

Mastercard. 2021. "Africa claims top three spots in Mastercard Index for highest concentration of women businesses owners in the world." *Mastercard Engagement Bureau*, 11 January. Available at https://newsroom.mastercard.com/mea/press-releases/africa-claims-top-three-spots-in-mastercard-index-for-highest-concentration-of-women-businesses-owners-in-the-world/

Mbo'o-Tchouawou, Michèle et al. 2016. "Assessing the participation of men and women in cross-border trade in agriculture: Evidence from selected East African countries." *ReSAKSS Working Paper No. 38*. Addis Ababa: Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System. Available at https://www.resakss.org/sites/default/files/Gender_and_Trade_Final_Version-38.pdf.

MINEFID. 2019. *Annuaire statistique de l'économie et des finances 2018*. Ouagadougou: Burkina Faso.

My Joy Online. 2020. "Bawumia commissions 100-bed infectious disease centre sponsored by Ghana COVID-19 Private Sector Fund." *Myjoyonline.com*, 25 July. Available at: https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/health/bawumia-commissions-100-bed-infectious-disease-centre-sponsored-by-ghana-covid-19-private-sector-fund/

Obeng-Akrofi, Ebenezer I. 2020. "Ghana will shine once more as a beacon of democracy in Africa." *Africa Blogging*, 5 December. Available at https://blogging.africa/democracy/will-ghana-shine-once-more-as-a-beacon-of-democracy-in-africa/

Oduro, Abena D. and Tsikata, Dzodzi. 2020. *Gender Analysis of Ghana's COVID-19 Response Measures*. Accra: Women's Rights (NETRIGHT) Ghana.

Ogando, Ana C. et al. 2021. "Impacts of the Covid- 19 pandemic and unpaid care work on informal workers' livelihoods", *International Labour Review*.

Okafor, Chiamaka. 2021. "ECOWAS leaders agree to reopen land borders in January 2022." *Premium Times*, 16 December. Available at https://www.

premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/500689-ecowas-leaders-agree-to-reopen-land-borders-in-january-2022.html

Petetsi, Julius Yao. 2020. "Dr. Oko Boye gives proper definition for 'Frontline Health Workers.'" *Ghanaian Times,* 22 July. Available at https://allafrica.com/stories/202007220603.html

Pozzan, Emanuela and Cattaneo, Umberto. 2020. "Women Health Workers: Working Relentlessly in Hospitals and at Home." *International Labour Organization*, 7 April. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_741060/lang--en/index.htm

Ramírez-Soto, Max C. et al. 2021. "Sex differences in the incidence, mortality, and fatality of COVID-19 in Peru", *PLOS ONE,* 16: 6, e0253193.

Ray, Julie. 2021. "COVID-19 Put More Than 1 Billion Out of Work." *GALLUP*, 3 May. Available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/348722/covid-put-billion-work.aspx

Service d'Information du Gouvernement du Burkina Faso (SIG). 2021. "Lutte contre la maladie à Coronavirus (COVID-19) au Burkina Faso : Le couvre-feu maintenu de 19 heures à 5 heures du matin." *Service d'Information du Gouvernement du Burkina Faso*. Available at https://www.sig.gov.bf/actualites/details?tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=320&tcHash=f99b9bb926490f1c777c5643529af8f4

Smith, Julia. 2019. "Overcoming the 'tyranny of the urgent': integrating gender into disease outbreak preparedness and response", *Gender & Development* 27 (2): 355–369

Smith, Julia et al. 2021. "More than a public health crisis: A feminist political economic analysis of COVID-19", *Global Public Health* 16: (8-9): 1364–1380.

The World Bank. 2020a. *GDP per capita (current US$) – Burkina Faso*. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=BF

The World Bank. 2020b. *GDP per capita (current US$) – Ghana*. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=GH

Tsikata, Dzodzi and Darkwah, Akosua K. 2019. "Work and Employment", *Ghana Social Development Outlook 2018*. Accra: ISSER. Pp. 120-149.

Tsikata, Dzodzi and Torvikey, Dzifa. 2021. *Africa's COVID-19 Responses: Proactivity, Hits and Misses and Deepening Inequalities*. Leiden: INCLUDE.

Undurraga, Eduardo A. et al. 2021. "COVID-19 case fatality risk by age and gender in a high testing setting in Latin America: Chile, March-August 2020", *Infectious Diseases of Poverty* 10: 11. DOI: 10.1186/s40249-020-00785-1.

United Nations Fund for Population Activities. 2020a. "UNFPA Supports DOVVSU To

Activate Domestic Violence Hotline." *UNFPA*, 19 April. Available at https://ghana.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-supports-dovvsu-activate-domestic-violence-hotline

United Nations Fund for Population Activities. 2020b. "Funding Shortfall, Lack of Protection for Four Million Women and Girls Further Destabilizes Central Sahel." *UNFPA*, 19 October. Available at https://www.unfpa.org/pcm/node/25497

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2020a. *Human Development Report 2020. The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene*. Available at https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2020b. *Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report: Burkina Faso*. Available at https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/BFA.pdf / https://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BFA

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2020c. *Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report: Ghana*. Available at https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/GHA.pdf/ https://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/GHA

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). *Secondary Education, April 2021*. Available at https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education/#

Warren, Shana et al. 2020. "RECOVR Burkina Faso: Tracking the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic." *Innovations for Poverty Action*. Available at https://www.poverty-action.org/recovr-study/recovr-burkina-faso-tracking-effects-covid-19-pandemic

Wayack Pambè, Madeleine, et al. 2021. *Burkina Faso Country Study on COVID-19 measures and impacts*. Leiden: INCLUDE.

Wilkins, Henry. 2020. "In Burkina Faso, COVID-19 fight complicated by war, displacement." *Al Jazeera*. 16 March. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/16/in-burkina-faso-covid-19-fight-complicated-by-war-displacement

Wilkins, Henry. 2021. "Death Toll from Burkina Faso Attack Rises to 53. *VOA News Africa*, 18 November. Available at https://www.voanews.com/a/death-toll-from-burkina-faso-attack-rises-to-53-/6317271.html

World Health Organization (WHO). 2020a. Country Profiles - Ghana, 2020. Available at https://www.who.int/countries/gh. Accessed 15 October 2020.

World Health Organization (WHO). 2020b. Country Profiles – Burkina Faso, 2020.

Available at: https://www.who.int/countries/bfa.

World Vision Ghana. 2020. "Teenage pregnancy during COVID-19 lockdowns may keep 1 million girls out of school in Africa." *World Vision International*. Available at https://www.wvi.org/stories/ghana/teenage-pregnancy-during-covid-19-lockdowns-may-keep-1-million-girls-out-school

# A Tale of Two Worlds Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: Is A New More Just Economic Order Possible?

**Leah Eryenyu**

> "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on it being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*" (Dickens, 1859: 1)

In July 2021, I got my second dose of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine. And with this act, I became an outlier—one of the few Africans, and even fewer Ugandans, who were fully vaccinated. To date, only 2,47% of Africa's population is fully vaccinated (Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) compared to 52,1% in the United States (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) and 67,3% in Europe (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021). In Uganda, at the time of writing, only about 1.5 million people had received at least one dose of the vaccine or both (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2021). In April 2021, when I got my first shot, the vaccine was being prioritised for the elderly, those with co-morbidities, and essential workers, including teachers and the police. However, vaccine uptake was incredibly low at the time, driven, in part, by vaccine hesitancy due to misinformation, lack of information about where to get vaccines, and a health infrastructure and supply chain that privileged Kampala, the capital, at the expense of further-off rural areas where the elderly predominate. This set of circumstances meant that people outside the priority categories, such as myself, were not being turned away.

Getting my second shot was a bigger battle. Vaccines had run out around the time my second shot was coming due and I spent countless hours researching what would happen to me if I missed the window for it. While other countries like Canada had hoarded vaccines and had enough to vaccinate their population several

times over, we had to rely on the uncertainty and the drip, drip, drip of donations coming in the hundreds of thousands for a population of millions. I got my second shot of the vaccine in the middle of the second lockdown in Uganda. Both public and private transport had been banned. The government's strategy was to set up vaccination sites as close to people's homes as possible. This, however, was not successful, as some sites were several hours away on foot. There were no exceptions for the elderly, disabled, or those with any ailments. We all had to walk.

While this struggle was happening in my backyard, a battle of a different kind was being waged in another part of the globe. Stories that elicited disbelief and threw into sharp relief the differences between our worlds were being told about the American government incentivising vaccination with offers of a free beer with every shot (Miller, 2021) while some states even introduced lotteries (Hassan and Kannapell, 2021). In the meantime, mostly away from the limelight, however, a political power struggle was happening at the World Trade Organization. Global North countries were refusing to support a demand for a waiver on the Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement that would give poor and middle-income countries access to the technology and knowledge to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines at scale (Meredith, 2021). Once again, the hierarchy of the value of life in the North and South were being made clear for all to see. Inspired by greed and undergirded by racism, Global North governments could justifiably be accused of colluding with privately-owned pharmaceutical companies to deny a chance at life and dignity for the majority of the world, because it threatened their bottom line and their soft power. While Global South countries demanded trade justice, to allow us all equitable access to manufacturing and purchase of vaccines, we instead got charity that allows the world's superpowers to burnish their White Saviour complexes, and causes Africans to be further debased by entrenching the narrative of the perpetual beggar. And in keeping with precedents of sending waste and subpar-quality products to the continent and to the Global South (Mwende, 2021), some of these vaccines have been nearing expiration at the time of donation (Newey and Brown, 2021). In effect, some of the donations are useless.

There are no circumstances that better illustrate the inequality between the two worlds—of the power brokers and the structurally excluded, the rich and the poor, of black and white—than those surrounding vaccine access. The tale of two worlds harkens to Dickens' telling of a tale of two cities—with the "haves" already fully vaccinated and safe, hoarding and living large, while the "have nots" eke out

a living while playing the vaccine hunger games[4]. Just like Dickens warns in his seminal work, this cannot end well for these nouveau aristocrats. And yet, this is but a sliver of the pandemic experience. Income inequality, gender injustice, eugenicist ideology against people with disabilities, homophobia, and racial inequality have all been inscribed in sharp relief in the story of the pandemic. I believe these are symptoms and manifestations of neo-liberal capitalism run amok.

## Medical History: The Faux Utopia of the Time Before the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has now become a marker of time. There is now a time before and after the pandemic, signalling the massive shifts that have happened since its onset. Deep in the fog of the pandemic, it is easy to be lulled into thinking with fondness about the time before it. It feels utopian compared to the current reality. An examination of the world's medical history, if the analogy can be extended, shows that the time before was great only for a few, and that the world's structural anatomy was slowly but surely decaying.

Before the pandemic, the global community was already charting a dangerous path. Market-based approaches were being fronted in response to the world's most pressing issues, most of them caused by the same neo-liberal market approaches. In Africa, the legacy of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s could be read in every decaying or closing public school or hospital, quickly replaced by a shinier, pricier private-run version that the majority of the population could not afford. In response to the global proliferation of neo-liberal market ideology, Africa sought to position itself as a continent open for business, trading the interests and wellbeing of its citizens by looking the other way instead of regulating rapacious business practices. The race to the bottom as each country tried to outwit the other in providing the lowest tax rates in order to attract foreign direct investment came at a cost—nearly $90 billion lost in illicit financial flows annually (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020), a figure that pales in comparison to annual official development assistance of about $49 billion (World Bank, 2019) that the White Saviours like to splash about as part of their soft power strategies. The same strategies that allow the continent to haemorrhage crucial resources has also

1 This term has been used to describe the extreme difficulties experienced by minoritised groups in accessing vaccines, in contrast to the relative ease that the rich and privileged have had; very much like the characters in the Hunger Games, a dystopian novel by Suzanne Collins where children from poor communities have to kill each other in order to survive, for the amusement of the rich ruling class.

allowed the gross amassing of personal wealth such that eight men own as much wealth as half the world's population, i.e., 3,6 billion people (OXFAM, 2017). The same school of thought that considers this obvious injustice to be a result of hard work and business smarts, instead of gross exploitation, also believes that economies should be left to grow unchecked, regardless of the cost to the environment and the people living in it. The singular pursuit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at the expense of anything else has led to the massive felling of forests to create room for cash crops like palm oil and sugarcane. With forests, which serve as carbon sinks, gone, alarm bells are now being sounded that the extreme and unpredictable weather events that have been experienced across the globe are here to stay and shall keep getting worse. Further, in an economy where money has become the only means of exchange, poor people have traded in subsistence farming for plantation agriculture, putting themselves and their families at risk of hunger. Amidst all this, women and poor people have been lifting up this unjust economy at the expense of their wellbeing. Their bodies have existed in service of the neo-liberal capitalist machinery, toiling in low cadre, low wage jobs in the garment industry, on flower farms and as domestic workers, while also subsidising the economy through unpaid care work.

This economic system designed to benefit only a few at the expense of the majority is untenable. Economic growth alone is not an indicator of a healthy economy, because the daily lived experiences of the majority remain that of struggle, even in rich countries. The COVID-19 pandemic thrown into the mix greatly reduces this entity's chances of survival. To treat this problem, we need a complete change of course.

## Add A Pandemic and Stir

Almost two years into the pandemic, however, we have not changed course. We have continued on as before and picked up some even worse habits. The rich have become so pompously wealthy that some of them can even afford to take a five-minute joyride to the edge of space (Wattles, 2021), while the majority of the world's workers lost US$3,7 trillion in income (International Labour Organization, 2021) and women bore the brunt of it with their loss, due to unemployment, comparable to the combined wealth of 98 countries (OXFAM, 2021). This chain of events is now triggering an oversupply of people willing to do any job at any cost. Workers need to feed their families, and thus have had little choice but to continue working under

the worst of circumstances, "prefer[ring] the lottery of infection over the certainty of starvation" (de Waal et al., 2020).

The pandemic has also blown wide open the burden of care work and shown how much it has been neglected in policy and practice. State-mandated restrictions, including shutting down schools, have confined more people to the domestic sphere where the amount of work undertaken by women has increased exponentially. Women now have to work doubly hard, serving as teachers for home-schooled children, cooks, and the invisible workforce nursing COVID-19 patients back to health at home. There was also an increased level of violence against women in the home during state-mandated lockdowns.

No sustainable measures have been put in place to address inequality in COVID-19 treatment. In a poor country such as mine, private healthcare players have, in response to increased demand for COVID care, arbitrarily set the prices of treatments so high that people have had to trade in their land titles or other valuable assets to be able to afford it.

The macro-economic policy decisions taken in the past have complicated and limited the ability of governments to respond to the myriad crises arising from the pandemic. For the Global South that loses billions annually in tax evasion and avoidance, carted off to finance and build some of the Global North's cities, there could not be sufficient revenue to devise responsive social protection mechanisms to cater to millions of newly unemployed, and buttress significantly reduced income streams. The reliance on debt and aid, with potentially more dire consequences this time, has continued, despite warnings to African nations about inching towards unsustainable indebtedness. Global South countries banded together and tried to influence a global minimum tax rate that would enable them to raise revenue from multi-national corporations, but these efforts were frustrated. African countries argued that the 15% minimum rate agreed upon by the G7[2], together with its attendant conditionalities, would not enable economies to collect sufficient revenue to be able to rebuild during and after the pandemic, and neither would it address the unjust repatriation of profits off the continent by multi-national corporations (Tax Justice Network Africa, 2021).

The pandemic has shrunk or even completely closed spaces for organising and strategising for movements and social justice actors. With a lot of organisations moving online due to socialising restrictions, large swathes of people, particularly women, with limited internet access because of high internet data costs and

poor internet infrastructure are excluded, further deepening the digital divide. Governments have also taken advantage of COVID-19 restrictions to muffle political dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and restrict the activities of minoritised groups such as the LGBTQI community (Ghoshal, 2020).

## A Responsive Remedy for An Ailing Political-Economic Order

In a widely publicised statement, African feminists set the tone for the kind of change that they want to see to course-correct this path of destruction that we are currently travelling. I agree with their assertion that "this crisis is an opportunity to dislodge structural inequality and re-frame the political economy which contributed to this tipping point" (African Feminism, 2020). These are some of the changes we should push to see as we remake the world into the image we want.

We must challenge prevailing economic orthodoxy and propose alternative economic systems that foreground the wellbeing of people and planet, and not GDP growth, and that quash unchecked consumerism and the exploitative nature of capitalism. We must be bold in dreaming of and demanding a welfare state that invests in public services and protects and promotes the economic and social wellbeing of its citizens. The resources to fund this sort of enterprise would require a rejection of the models of development and growth proposed by international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. We should focus on domestic resource mobilisation by developing and enforcing just tax systems, and progressively wean ourselves off debt financing. The odious debt being held by African states, many times negotiated under unfair terms, and ballooning because of compounded interest, must be forgiven and cancelled. There is no way around it without completely decimating the economies of poor countries. The agenda of rethinking economic policy should centre care work performed by women as critical to its sustenance and should therefore not only seek to set up social infrastructure and services that lessen the burden on women, but also actively work to recruit men as equal partners. We need to realise that removing the yoke of unpaid care work is indispensable for women's liberation. The time for unrewarded subsidisation of the economy at the expense of women should become a thing of the past.

We must also advocate for a COVID-19 response and recovery plan that is cognisant of the gross historical disadvantages suffered by people on the margins

and centre their needs. Maintaining dignity under the worst of circumstances requires a fundamental understanding that human dignity should always prevail, no matter the situation. The informal sector, which drives the economies of many developing nations, especially in Africa, and which is populated by mostly women and yet remains largely invisible in policy formulation, should be a point of critical focus because of heightened vulnerabilities amidst the pandemic.

Of course, none of these aspirations will come to bear without organising. As splintered groups with varying messages and limited knowledge and strategies for resistance, we are easy to pick apart. "To get women to submit to flagrant mass exploitation, they have to be made afraid, they have to be silenced. Fear and silencing women are strategies for political and economic domination" (Kachingwe, 2019). We know that collective action aggregates the little power that each individual has into a formidable force that has to be listened to. And so, we must organise to be one unimpeachable unit. As one voice, we also create opportunities to influence. "Radically different voices and ways of thinking about how our economies can and should work – in the interests of the majority – are rarely at the decision-making table due to the gendered and racialised ways knowledge production systems have been created" (GADN, 2020: 40). We must therefore invest in raising political consciousness that rejects widely held models of politico-economic governance and also create spaces for dreaming and re-imagining feminist futures.

To address our current problems and to prevent its re-occurrence, I have recommended a range of policy options. But all of this will come to nought if we do not have access to vaccines. This is the most urgent, deferred matter of our time. Inequality in vaccine access is entrenching inequality in everything else along racial and class lines. However, inevitably, the false sense of security created by vast wealth crumbles away. Inequality breeds anarchy and if Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus' metaphor about the impracticality of putting out half a fire when the whole block is ablaze (Ghebreyesus, 2021) is anything to go by, this state of affairs shall end in carnage. For everyone.

Re-imagining a new world order seems too idealistic, particularly when the cards are stacked against us so deliberately that we cannot see our way out. But it is idealism that enabled our foremothers to imagine a world where women could live with autonomy. Every revolution needs a dash of idealism and hope; after all, that is what keeps us waking up in the morning. Nonetheless, our dreams will be snuffed out if they remain only that, with no strategy,

organising and funding in place. It *is* possible to create a more just economic order and more equal world when our collective energies and ideas are put together. "We have overthrown empire before, we can do it again" (Kachingwe, 2019).

## References


Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. *COVID-19 Vaccination*. Available at https://africacdc.org/covid-19-vaccination/

African Feminism. 2020. *African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement, African Feminism*. Available at https://africanfeminism.com/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. *COVID Data Tracker*. Available at https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations_vacc-total-admin-rate-total

de Waal, Alex. et al. 2020. "Coronavirus: Why lockdowns may not be the answer in Africa." *BBC News*, 14 April. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52268320

Dickens, Charles. 1859. "Book the First: Recalled to Life—Chapter 1: The Period." *A Tale of Two Cities*. Lit2Go Edition. Chapter available at https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/22/a-tale-of-two-cities/108/book-the-first-recalled-to-lifechapter-1-the-period/

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. 2021. *COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*. Available at https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab

Gender and Development Network. 2020. *The audacity to disrupt. An Introduction to Feminist Macro-level economics*. London: GADN. Available at https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/the-audacity-to-disrupt-femnets-african-feminist-macroeconomics-academy-resource-pack

Ghebreyesus, Tedros. 2021. "We live in a global village...." *Twitter*, 21 August. Available at https://twitter.com/DrTedros/status/1428979808495624199?s=20.

Ghoshal, Neela. 2020. "Uganda LGBT Shelter Residents Arrested on COVID Pretext." *Human Rights Watch,* 3 April. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/uganda-lgbt-shelter-residents-arrested-covid-19-pretext

Global Alliance for Tax Justice. 2021. *African CSOs Call for Rejection of the G7 Global Tax Deal. TJNA,* 7 June. Available at https://www.globaltaxjustice.org/en/latest/tjna-african-csos-call-rejection-g7-global-tax-deal

Hassan, Adeel and Kannapell, Andrea. 2021. "These are the U.S. states trying lotteries

to increase Covid vaccinations." *New York Times,* 3 July. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/03/world/covid-vaccine-lottery.html

Human Rights Watch. 2020. *Uganda Authorities Weaponise Covid-19 for Repression.* 20 November. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/uganda-authorities-weaponize-covid-19-repression

International Labour Organization. 2021. "Uncertain and uneven recovery expected following unprecedented labour market crisis." 25 January. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_766949/lang--en/index.htm

Kachingwe, Nancy. 2019. "Fearing our Silence and Silencing our Fears." Paper presented at the 8th Convening of the Uganda Feminist Forum held in Jinja, Uganda. Paper available at https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Opening-Address-Uganda-Feminist-Forum-2019.pdf.

Meredith, Sam. 2021. "Rich countries are refusing to waive the rights on Covid vaccines as global cases hit record levels." *CNBC.* 22 April. Available at https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/22/covid-rich-countries-are-refusing-to-waive-ip-rights-on-vaccines.html

Miller, Zeke. 2021. "Free beer, other new incentives for Biden's 'vaccine sprint'.", *AP News,* 3 June. Available at https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-government-and-politics-health-8168ae1c68ca955b620082d862c911ad. Accessed 5 September 2021.

Ministry of Health, Uganda. 2021. *Corona Virus Pandemic.* Available at https://www.health.go.ug/covid/

Mwende, Yvonne. 2021. "Exploitation of Africans by multinationals." *The Star Kenya,* 1 April. https://www.the-star.co.ke/opinion/columnists/2019-04-01-exploitation-of-africans-by-multinationals/

Newey, Sarah and Brown, Will. 2021. "'Trojan horse': bulk of UK vaccine donations to poor countries set to expire in September." *The Telegraph*, 28 July. Available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/trojan-horse-bulk-uk-vaccine-donations-poor-countries-set-expire/

Oxfam International. 2017. *Just 8 Men Own Same Wealth as Half the World.* 15 January. Available at https://www.oxfamamerica.org/press/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-as-half-the-world/

Oxfam International. 2021. *COVID-19 cost women globally $800 billion in income in one year.* 29 April. Available at https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/

covid-19-cost-women-globally-over-800-billion-lost-income-one-year#:~:text=The%20COVID%2D19%20crisis%20cost,3.9%20percent%20loss%20for%20men

The World Bank. 2019. *Net official development assistance and official aid received (current US$) - Sub-Saharan Africa (IDA & IBRD countries)*. Available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD?locations=T6

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. 2020. *Africa could gain $89 billion annually by curbing illicit financial flows*. 28 September. Available at https://unctad.org/press-material/africa-could-gain-89-billion-annually-curbing-illicit-financial-flows-un-says

Wattles, Jackie. 2021. "Jeff Bezos just went to space and back." *CNN*, July 21. Article available at https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/20/tech/jeff-bezos-blue-origin-launch-scn/index.html

# A Female Inventor Ahead of her Time

## Akosua K. Darkwah Speaks with Veronica Bekoe

African scientists have responded to the pandemic by developing a range of largely low-tech innovations to either ease testing/treatment or assist with adherence to the containment measures imposed by various states. In Dakar, Senegal, students built a multifunctional robot that helped caregivers treat patients while minimising the risk of infections; in Nigeria, another student built a portable ventilator (BBC News, 2020). In South Africa, a scientist developed a COVID-19 rapid testing kit, and, across the continent, there are many automated handwashing devices, such as the one designed by nine-year-old Stephen Wamukota in rural Kenya (UNDP, 2020: 12). The media houses that have showcased the work of African innovators developing COVID solutions have tended to focus heavily on men, inadvertently giving the impression that women have not contributed to innovations in the last two years. Yet, women are also inventors. In fact, thirty-odd years before the global recognition of automated handwashing devices as a tool in the fight against COVID-19, Veronica Bekoe in Ghana developed one such device.

Born in Accra, the capital of Ghana, in 1943, Veronica Bekoe attended Aburi Girls Secondary School and then the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, where she studied Biological Sciences, graduating in 1971. She is famous for having invented what has come to be known as the Veronica Bucket, a mechanism for hand washing. It comprises a bucket of water with a tap fixed at the bottom, mounted at hand height, and a bowl at the base to collect the waste water. In this interview, we focus on the educational and work life of Veronica Bekoe to understand the context and process by which she came to invent the handwashing mechanism which has proved crucial in the fight against COVID-19 in Ghana. Her story, like that of many other African inventors, also highlights the difficulties with patenting and upscaling which make it difficult, if not near impossible, for African inventors to benefit fully from their inventions.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Growing up, did you want to be a biological scientist or a doctor?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I did not want to be a doctor. For some reason, although I was geared towards the sciences, I did not think I could do medicine academically, given the sort of person that I am.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Were you one of the few women who was doing Biological Sciences at the time?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Actually, in my year, we were six - three boys and three girls. We were the first batch of the Biological Science students. I didn't keep track of those who came after us, so I don't know if the number increased or decreased.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Do you still have friends from that batch?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Sure, I do. I am still in contact with them. Yes, we were very good friends.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** When did you finish university?

**Veronica Bekoe:** In 1971.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, you didn't go to university right after secondary school?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I did my Advanced level (A level) first

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** In 1960?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I did my A level in 1962 and worked for some time.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Okay. Where did you work then?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Bank of Ghana.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, you must have gone to university in 1968?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes, I had some health issues with my eyes, so I had to wait for a while.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What happened after you finished in 1971?

**Veronica Bekoe:** When I finished in 1971, I was supposed to be employed by the Ministry of Health. It was delayed till February 1972, when I was finally employed by the Ministry of Health and that's when my work life started.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Did you work at the Ministry of Health in Accra or Kumasi?

**Veronica Bekoe:** In Accra. I was posted to Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital. There was a public health laboratory in Korle-Bu. That was where I started my working life.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** And what did you do there?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Remember I said I studied biology, so I had no clue what work in a medical laboratory entailed. So, whatever I did, I learnt on the job. I was lucky, I think, to have met the crop of workers that I met at that time, from the head right down to the cleaners. There was order, there was discipline. Everybody knew his place. There were many sections. One section worked on communicable diseases. Then, there was the tuberculosis section, the sexually-transmitted infections and the cholera sections. So, in every section, those who worked there had to take me under their wings and teach me on the job how to process the samples. Eventually, I was struck with cholera. We had to go to the field and take samples from people; we took samples from water bodies, people's cooking utensils and containers used to serve water, even the food. At that time, we were even testing food sellers periodically. We were working hand in hand with the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. Periodically, they would send a batch of samples and you would be amazed at some of the results we had. The *waakye* [rice and beans] sellers, the rice sellers too, they serve the rice with their hands. Some of them obviously had cholera. So, for a long time, I was doing work on cholera and general diarrhoeas and other diarrhoea diseases until 1986, the advent of HIV. That was when the first HIV case was detected in

Ghana. The Ministry of Health and Ghana Health Service were addressing the issue and, eventually, the decision was taken that the public health laboratories should come on board. I was one of the eight people selected to learn how to do the testing. There were so many different test kits. I think the country decided to use the Wellcome kit. So, somebody had to come down from the United Kingdom to teach us how to do the testing. That was how the HIV testing started in Ghana. Eventually, I was the only one left to carry on. I don't know exactly why.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Were there other women?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I was the only woman. The rest were all men.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, at what point did you think of the buckets?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Having said that, it meant that all the training on the use of the [HIV] kits in the country fell on me, so I had lots of opportunities to train, and I had to do Training of Trainers for the whole country. In November 1992 or thereabouts, I got to know that USAID was going to help Ghana improve the public health laboratory system. So, they got a consultant whose name was Joanne Hettrick to come and help with the project. She needed somebody in this country to work with, and I was appointed by the head of the public health laboratory to work with her. She was not supposed to build laboratories, but to improve on the existing ones. But I remember I told you that there was just one laboratory for the whole country, and she had to undertake feasibility studies in the country with regards to the infrastructure and the personnel. I had to travel with her throughout the country to look at all these things. One of the areas we looked at was the prevention of infections. You know, laboratories deal with diseases and the public health laboratories deal with infectious diseases. So, we went round and what we noticed was that in the facilities where there was no running water, the people were using all sorts of things to wash their hands.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** These were laboratories attached to hospitals?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes, remember we are not talking about public health laboratories now.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** We are talking about regular laboratories.

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes, regular diagnostics laboratories in the public sector from the hospitals with several employees right down to the health centre where you have one man stationed. Wherever we went, we did not only visit the laboratories, but we also looked at other departments as well: the labour ward, the doctor's office, and so on. In the facilities where there was no running water, people were using bowls of water, buckets of water. At best you could get two bowls: one for washing and one for rinsing. Sometimes, you would get a bucket with a cup. How do you wash your hands? Sometimes, it was only one bowl. So, it became a worry. At the end of each day, we had to write a report. I kept thinking about the fact that we needed running water to wash hands properly in the hospital setting. At that time, people were using covered aluminium containers to sell porridge. So, one evening, I told Joanne, "If we get one of these things, the medium-sized one, and fix a tap, won't it provide running water?" "That would work", she said. "Would we get someone to do it for us?" she asked. I said yes. So, there was a plumber, we had a family plumber.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What was this family plumber's name?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Musah; now he is no more. In fact, he died about four or five years ago. We lived at Nima then, so I told him about it, and he said he could make it. Those containers were sold at the market, so, since we were going to be going from one hospital to another, we needed a reasonably-sized one, and fixed the tap. I brought it in to show Joanne and we put water in it.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** And voila, you had portable running water!

**Veronica Bekoe:** What we realised is that we had the normal metal tap and looking at the thickness of the aluminium container; we had to do several prototypes.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So those earlier ones were aluminium, not plastic?

**Veronica Bekoe:** No, no, no, they were not plastic. With that problem we changed to plastic containers.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, all of these were made by Musah?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes, the aluminium ones. He also did the first plastic one, but what happened was that I made this bucket for the health facilities, for Ghana Health Service and the Ministry of Health. So, it was limited to the laboratories and, once you had a facility where the laboratory workers did not have running water, it was obvious other departments in the same facility would not have running water. Mind you, in each facility, when we went to do the training, it was not just for the laboratory workers, all the nurses and doctors were invited. So, when they realised what was going on, that we were using this container to provide running water to teach the laboratory workers how to get running water, the entire facility learnt about it. For a long time, apart from people I had direct contact with while teaching them, nobody knew who invented the bucket. Nobody knew me, but the bucket was in the system.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** You and Mr. Musah, you moved from the aluminium to the plastic because that was more durable. Was it Mr. Musah who made the plastic bucket?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I had to go to the industrial area to buy the plastic containers in the size I wanted.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** And then he fixed the tap. What made you think the plastic one would work better?

**Veronica Bekoe:** We tried. It was an experiment. I thought the metal tap was very heavy.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Then you got a plastic bucket, you fixed a metal tap and it worked.

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes, and it worked. I even have one now.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Do you have some of the earlier ones?

**Veronica Bekoe:** The aluminium one? I threw some things away last week.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Including your invention? Where did you throw it? Have the garbage collectors come for it?

**Veronica Bekoe:** The one with the metal tap was too old.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, other people started making it?

**Veronica Bekoe:** The health facilities just got the plastic container and got a plumber. So later on, I realised that schools started using them, as did private maternity homes. The private midwives' association invited me several times to give training to their members. So, they also started using them. Later on, eateries started using them on a small scale, so it was out there. Nobody had any idea where it was coming from till the advent of COVID. To be honest, I did not know what was happening, until one day I was driving down this road. If you drive down this road now, you will see a lot of them. Then people started calling me, I don't know how people got my contact or number. People just started calling me. The few buckets that I made actually had my telephone number on them, but this was long before COVID-19, in early 1993.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** That would have been a landline, not a cell phone number.

**Veronica Bekoe:** I still don't know how people got in touch with me. I don't remember. I started getting telephone calls from the media.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So who named it the "Veronica bucket"?

**Veronica Bekoe:** So, Joanne said, since I came up with the idea, it should be named the Veronica Bucket. She died about four years ago. I was with her. She was in New Mexico. I stayed with her for two weeks before she died. Normally, when I went to visit my daughter, I visited her and, on that occasion, I got to know that she was not well. I stayed for a bit and two weeks later I was called.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, she named it the Veronica Bucket, but you did not patent it.

**Veronica Bekoe:** I attempted it, but it was too frustrating. I was advised to patent a brand, a specific brand. I submitted the first batch of documents, but it has been over a year, and I have not heard from them. I paid the equivalent of $200. Look at me, now I have time but then I didn't have the time. I was at work at 7 o'clock in the morning and at 5 p.m., I had to go home to my five children. I did not have time then. Sometimes, on my way to work, I would pass by the Registrar-General's office, or when I finished work a bit earlier than usual, but the thing is, that was not the motive, I did not design it to make money out of it. The objective was to help us to prevent and minimise infections through our hands because these hands were used in the laboratories and these same hands were used for everything. That was not the objective. This thing has been in existence for over 30 years. Without COVID-19, you would not be sitting with me now, so that was it.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** But it means that now you have no control over all the versions, and nobody gives you money.

**Veronica Bekoe:** Even the government has not bought one bucket.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Do you make some yourself? Do you have someone making some for you?

**Veronica Bekoe:** Yes.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, apart from the media calling you for interviews, has any government institution called you?

**Veronica Bekoe:** I have done something featured on Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and in the Daily Graphic [the most widely circulated paper in Ghana]. There was a whole page on me.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** But have you received state recognition for your efforts?

**Veronica Bekoe:** In 2019, for International Women's Day, I was at home when one of my colleagues from the National AIDS Control Programme (I worked there when I left the public health laboratory) called to say that the First Lady's secretary wanted

my number. So, I was told to expect a lady from her. She called and said the First Lady, Mrs Rebecca Akufo-Addo, was inviting me to a get-together on International Women's Day. She did not tell me anything else. On the day of the event, she called to make sure I would attend the event. When I got there, she called again to make sure I was at the event. Apparently, some women were going to be honoured, and I was first on the list. In 2005 as well, at the end of the year, the Ghana Health Service honoured me for the invention of the Veronica Bucket.

**Akosua K. Darkwah**: You were recognised by both the Ghana Health Service and the First Lady, even before COVID-19?

**Veronica Bekoe**: Yes.

**Akosua K. Darkwah**: How do you feel about having invented the bucket?

**Veronica Bekoe**: I feel blessed and humbled, because this was 30 years ago. It was within the health sector. Even the people in the health sector did not know who I was nor how the whole thing came about. Everybody was calling it the Veronica Bucket but they had no clue why. Even when I was working at the National AIDS Control Programme, my boss told me that the accountant asked him why the bucket was called the Veronica Bucket. You know, I feel very humbled that this small thing I thought I was creating to help people to prevent infectious diseases on the job has become something that is used worldwide beyond the shores of Ghana. I sent some to Portugal through the Ministry of Health, and to Ivory Coast, South Africa, and the southern and eastern part of Africa, all before the advent of COVID-19.

**Akosua K. Darkwah**: And you are not upset that others are making money off of it because you did not patent it?

**Veronica Bekoe**: I am upset but what can I do? I do not worry myself over things I cannot control. If I worry, where would that take me? It will rather raise my blood pressure. I have this philosophy; if it is yours, it will come. No matter how long it takes, I will get what is mine. Remember, I did this 30 years ago. I never knew it would even be recognised worldwide. It is now on Wikipedia. I do not worry about things I cannot control.

## References

BBC News. 2020. "Coronavirus: Ten African innovations to help tackle Covid-19." *BBC*, 16 August. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53776027

UNDP. 2020. *Africa Innovates. 50 Homegrown African Innovations Tackling Covid-19*. New York: UNDP. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Africa%20innovates%20-%2050%20homegrown%20African%20innovations%20tackling%20COVID-19%20%28Compressed%29.pdf

# Addressing the Needs of People with Disability During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with Comfort Mussa, founder of SisterSpeak

The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the world's population has a disability of one form or the other (WHO, 2021). With a population of approximately 1,390,000,000 people on the African continent (Worldometer, n.d.), this translates to 220,000,000 or roughly the entire population of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. Life for Africa's citizens with disability is not easy. Their needs are rarely taken into consideration in the organisation of everyday life on the continent; buildings are not wheelchair accessible, sign language interpretation is missing in health and educational facilities, as is the provision of Braille services in many institutions. As the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the continent, governments and civil society organisations rallied to provide support of different kinds to large segments of the population. For the most part, however, these service providers did not make any effort to reach out to the population with disability; they were simply forgotten. In Cameroon, though, SisterSpeak is one organisation that has consistently championed the cause of persons with disability. In this conversation, Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with the founder about her motivations for starting the organisation and the nature of their work during the pandemic.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Let's start with a bit about yourself.

**Comfort Mussa:** I am Comfort Mussa. I am Cameroonian and I live and work in the capital city, Yaoundé, as a journalist. I report extensively on social justice issues. As a journalist, my niche over the last 13 to 14 years has been to explore social injustice and tell such stories because this is missing in mainstream Cameroonian media. So, I started SisterSpeak as a platform for people to tell their stories. Then, over time, I discovered that not too many people had the skills to organise and tell their stories, so progressively it grew into a local organisation legally registered in Cameroon to train people to tell their stories and, beyond that, to engage in community activities

to address the challenges described in the stories. We have grown so much that I've launched a TV show, Spotlight, which also focuses on telling untold stories and amplifying minority voices.

**Akosua K. Darkwah** Okay, so let's go back to your community activities to address the issues that you describe in your stories. When did you start that?

**Comfort Mussa:** The social work aspect of my work really started with SisterSpeak because you would tell stories about, say, women who have been raped and when you went back to the community, they would say, "Now I'm afraid, I don't have a place to go to." Knowing that the reports amplify the problem but do not address them, I wanted to do something more. The women pushed me to want to do more than just tell the stories.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Do you have another group of people working with you on the social work side of it or you do that on your own?

**Comfort Mussa:** It's a full organisation with a team. We've been working together since 2015. In 2014 it was a blog, a website for stories and events. Now, it's an organisation: we have teams, and we have people working on the various projects. We have the disability needs coordinator who focuses on activities for women with disabilities and so on. We also have several volunteers who come in from time to time to work on different projects.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Okay. Do you then look for funding to run it?

**Comfort Mussa:** Yes.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What prompted the TV show?

**Comfort Mussa:** We wanted to have the farthest outreach that we can have. There is a lot that is happening, but you cannot find powerful voices speaking to these issues in Cameroon. The first topic we addressed on the show was backstreet abortions. If

you Google it, there is very little information because it is not a comfortable subject. It is a taboo, so to speak. Yet, many women are dying. I spoke with the Society of Gynaecologists in Cameroon. They told me that six out of ten maternal deaths are the result of unsafe abortions. And I've spoken with doctors who tell me numbers that will just blow your mind. Doctors see it in the hospital every day, but if you go online, it is not an issue in the sense that you will not have people speaking about this issue. The spotlight is designed to bring attention to the issues that are important. So for example, in the month of March 2021, we dedicated three episodes of the programme to talking about unsafe abortions. People are not comfortable with it, but if women are dying and having severe complications, then somebody has to talk about it. This is what Spotlight is about. It looks at the issues that are critical, but are not discussed in mainstream media, and brings the spotlight to it. The response has been great. Editors are asking, "Is this really happening? I didn't know about that, what can we do about it?" And this is what we want to do with Spotlight, make people aware of issues and get people engaged to address the issues. Others are working to address these issues and we want to celebrate these people also. That is the spirit behind Spotlight and that is what we seek to achieve.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** How often do you run it?

**Comfort Mussa:** Once a week, every Sunday for now. It's online. And what we do is that we share our content with local media houses that do not have the resources to produce such a programme. We make sure we produce it professionally and then offer it to these stations to re-publish on their platforms for free. We are also aware that not every Cameroonian may have data to stay on to watch the show online for an hour. So, after the show, we create three-minute extracts of the key bits of the programme which we share with our networks on WhatsApp.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Are you inviting other journalists to come in and share their stories about the marginalised?

**Comfort Mussa:** Yes, we try to be very inclusive and diverse, we want as many voices as possible. So the hosts for the conversations and the panels are part of our organisation, but the guests come from outside the organisation. And we partner with a German-Cameroonian TV station that has the equipment needed to do very

professional work. I have known this team for a while. I had a TV show from two or three years ago. It was very expensive to work on. The vision was the same: to tell hidden stories. My co-host was a woman with disability, an amazing journalist. We were funding it out of pocket. So, after the first two or three episodes, it was difficult to keep going. Advertisers are often not interested in stories or programmes about disability or taboo subjects. Advertisers will tell you that it's not sexy. It got too expensive to run on our own so that's how I reached out to that TV station. Luckily enough, they had watched previous programmes, knew our work and bought the idea to work with us.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Where does your interest in disability come from? How did that start?

**Comfort Mussa:** In 2014, my father had a stroke, a very intense one. And it affected his mobility. My dad led a normal life, he could walk, he could drive on his own. And then one day he had a stroke and his life turned around completely. Seeing him with a disability made me much more aware of the ways in which our cities are disability-unfriendly. In my city, he would find it difficult to get into many banks because of how inaccessible they were. Most public structures were not built with people with disability in mind. So, I wanted to do more, not just for my father, but for other people who were experiencing the same difficulties. I learnt from my father that his grandmother, my great-grandmother, was also a woman with disabilities who had to go through life with little support for her disability. I wished I could go back in time and give her a wheelchair, but I cannot, so I want to do that for other women. When I provide support for other women, I feel that I'm doing it for my great-grandmother.

I started reporting extensively on disability issues because I spent a lot of time in the hospital when my dad was admitted. I was exposed to a whole range of issues that people with disability faced: people with visual impairments unable to write final exams because a Braille version had not been prepared; women with hearing impairments unable to report their rapes because nobody at the police station understands sign language, and so on. This became a priority for me, I started reporting on disability. I also volunteered at a local organisation focused on disability issues because I wanted to do more, not just for my family but for other

people who had difficulty accessing spaces in the city. So, that's how my advocacy for disability started.

The first thing we did when we started SisterSpeak was to launch The National Essay and Story Writing competition, and one of the categories was disability because, in the media, very few people were reporting on that and, while I could write the stories, I did not want to be a lone ranger, the only person writing about disability. So this story writing competition with the subcategory on disability was to get people to write stories about social inclusion with a focus on disability. We gave cash prizes to the winners, and they also had the opportunity to intern with some partner disability organisations. That was a beautiful way to get more people interested in the issue of disability and exposed to the real-life challenges of people with disability. What is more beautiful is that young journalists with disability joined the contest and one won first prize. This became national news. More importantly, a lot more people began to report on disability and today the story is not what it was five to six years ago.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What kinds of things have changed?

**Comfort Mussa:** There is more reporting on disability. Many people may not get the terminologies right, but they can learn and grow. It is a good thing to know that more people are showing an interest in writing about disability and that more people are mainstreaming disability in their organisations.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** You did mention that when you first started your TV show, you were hosting it with a woman with disability. Can you tell us a little bit about her?

**Comfort Mussa:** She is a journalist as well, a very fine Cameroonian journalist, Hilda Bih, who works for the national radio station. When we started the programme, we wanted to focus on inclusion. Typically, women with disability do not feature on television. We wanted to challenge this stereotype. Hilda is an intelligent and fully capable journalist. In co-hosting the show with her, we wanted to redefine what representation should be on television. It is a pity that cost prevented us from keeping it running.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Is she part of the new version airing online?

**Comfort Mussa:** Unfortunately, no. Hilda no longer lives in Cameroon.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So now that we have heard about your general work as SisterSpeak, we can move on to your COVID-19 work specifically. Did you focus on women with disability from the very beginning?

**Comfort Mussa:** Yes, inclusion is a key part of our work. One person on our team at SisterSpeak is herself a woman with disability and her job in the organisation is to ensure that we focus on inclusion in everything we do. If we organise a workshop, we include female journalists with disability, we ensure that the space in which the workshop is organised is accessible, that the material is accessible and so on. We organised the first ever fashion show that had people with all types of disabilities in Cameroon. We wanted to change what representation means, we want to see women with disability on billboards, on TV. We want to see them in our local communities, we want to see them on national platforms. We are constantly thinking about people with disability. If I go to a bank and it is not accessible, I will tell the managers about the need to fix that. For me, working on disability is not simply a funded project, it is how I function, and members of my team think that way too.

So, when COVID-19 started, my team had a meeting to discuss how we could ensure that the needs of women with disability were met during this period. At first, we mostly talked to journalists, encouraging them, in their reportage, to think about the voices that are missing and to include them in their programmes. We also went into our communities to understand the needs of women with different disabilities because the needs of the women with visual impairments will be different from those with mobility challenges. When we did the first COVID-19 outreach, a sister-friend from Ghana donated hand sanitisers and we brought masks as well as detergents and donated these items to them. We learnt from them and when we came back to the office, we looked at the different issues raised and decided to act in our own small way to ensure a gender- and disability-inclusive approach to COVID-19 programming. Many of the care packages being donated did not reach women with disability; those with hearing impairments could not hear the announcements for the packages, those with mobility challenges were not in the markets or public squares when the goods were distributed, and so on. We therefore donated care packs to women with disability in particular. We also distributed a document in Braille,

that explained what COVID was and how it could be prevented, to over a 1,000 visually impaired people in certain regions of Cameroon. We also pointed out the inadequacies of different approaches to handling the pandemic. For example, many of the hand-washing points are not accessible to people in wheelchairs. Without an SMS option, those with hearing impairments with COVID-19 symptoms cannot access the information provided by the health service. Similarly, how is a person with visual impairment supposed to interpret the social distancing rule of one metre apart? Eventually, we developed a toolkit in English and French to explain what the problem is, how persons with disabilities were being excluded and how they could be included in programming. The tool kit is available on our website for free download (www.sisterspeak237.com).

We also did what we call "a feast of senses" to engage people to understand why inclusion in the COVID-19 response is important. The truth is, if you have not lived with a person with disability or do not have a disability yourself, you have no idea what their needs really are. It is hard to know the needs and to mainstream them. So we did a feast of senses, an idea we got from Access Israel and adapted to our local context. A feast of senses is basically a dinner party, where our guests (people from civil society, NGOs, the diplomatic corps) were invited to a three-course dinner. At each course, we made them lose one sense. For the first course, for example, they had it blindfolded and then we asked them, what does it mean to eat without seeing what you are eating? They understood everything we had been preaching about for years in five minutes. Their perceptions changed, and the testimonies of change were really powerful. So we encouraged the grant officers in our midst to include persons with disability on their checklist for accessing grant applications. If grant officers make it a requirement when giving grants, organisations will be compelled to do it. It worked, because a good number of them included this requirement and shared the feedback with us.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** I was struck by your point about the one-metre distance. What kinds of solutions have people come up with to convey that to people with visual impairments?

**Comfort Mussa:** So the solution actually came from a friend who has a visual disability himself. I asked him how to communicate the one-metre distance. So, he

stretched both hands out and it suddenly clicked. If you stretch both hands out and can't touch anybody to the left and to the right or in front of/behind you, then you know that the one-metre rule has been obeyed. Another solution is to actually measure the distance and arrange the chairs in a meeting setup such that they are already distanced.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What other kinds of things have you encouraged in your toolkit?

**Comfort Mussa:** We have encouraged churches and governments to include persons with disabilities on their response planning committees. If they are not included at the level where organisations are planning a response, chances are that they will be excluded. Our toolkit is gender- and disability-inclusive. When we had the lockdown and people flying into Cameroon were quarantined straight from the airport, I had a female friend who was quarantined for 28 days, not the usual 14. And during this time, she complained about the lack of water and sanitary pads. Clearly, those who planned the quarantine probably didn't think that women would need pads. If you're not a woman, it is hard to think periods when you're thinking about quarantining. However, if the planning committees were diverse and inclusive of persons with disability, women, people from indigenous communities, they could all then share their needs and ensure that these needs were addressed in the execution of any programme. There is also the need for evaluation. As at March 2021, Cameroon is experiencing a new wave which is more severe than the first one. And this week I was asking myself, "What are we doing differently? Did we evaluate what we did during the first wave? Can we improve?" Copying recommendations posted online from other contexts is not enough. We have to evaluate what works and does not work in our communities. So, in terms of tips, include a diverse group in planning, evaluate what you have done, and improve on it. COVID-19 is not going to be over for anybody until it is over for everybody, so we need to think about including everybody in our response.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Indeed. What would you say has been the impact of the work that you have done?

**Comfort Mussa:** Our major impact has been creating awareness. For me, that's powerful because we acknowledge the fact that our organisation is smal, and there are other bigger organisations in Cameroon that are working hard to promote the rights of women as well as persons with disability. While we do not have the resources to do a national outreach, in getting people to make small changes in their little corners, we will ultimately have a big change. Also, the number of people that have downloaded our toolkits is encouraging, as is the number of newspapers that now report on inclusion. Even the fact of this conversation with FA suggests that we have had some impact worth recognising.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Given your current successes, what are your plans for the future?

**Comfort Mussa:** Our plan with SisterSpeak is to keep disrupting and challenging the status quo. In the future, we want to have a community centre for women with disability. We have a programme to train and help women with disabilities get jobs. We have done it once and want to do a second phase of the programme. Ultimately, we want to offer the training on a more regular basis, not just once in a year. We also would like to have our own media resource centre in the future.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** We at FA wish you well in your efforts to improve the life chances of women with disability in Cameroon.

## References

World Health Organization. 2021. *Disability and Health*. Available at https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health.

Worldometer. No Date. *Africa Population (Live)*. https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/.

# Women's Organising in Nigeria During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with Azeenarh Mohammed, Buky Williams and Chitra Nagarajan**

African women have long organised for different purposes and so it has been with the pandemic. In different parts of the continent, women have come together to address different problems thrown up by the pandemic. One of the major fallouts has been gender-based violence (GBV). Across the globe, the incidence of GBV has risen in all the countries for which there is available data. State efforts to address this increased rate of violence, particularly on the African continent, have, however, been abysmal. Civil society organisations and women's rights movements have been at the forefront of advocating for increased attention to the issue of GBV in the midst of the pandemic. One country in which there has been a concerted effort to address GBV is Nigeria. There, members of the Nigerian Feminist Forum worked assiduously to raise the issue of GBV during the pandemic and to insist that states address it in a significant way. A second area of focus for the feminist movement in Nigeria during this period was police brutality, which is clearly linked to human rights and, specifically, women's rights. In addition to the work on GBV, Nigerian feminists also worked to address the abuse that Nigerian citizens faced at the hands of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) through the End SARS movement. This movement showed the power of women's activism in action and garnered international attention towards the end of 2020. In this conversation, Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with three active members of the Nigerian Feminist Forum – Azeenarh Mohammed, Buky Williams and Chitra Nagarajan – to gain insight into the work that the Nigerian feminist movement did to address the needs of women during the pandemic. These three women were also instrumental in the production of an OSIWA-funded report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender roles and relations in Nigeria (Nagarajan, 2020), which will also be discussed briefly.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourselves?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** I run a feminist organisation called The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs), which works, basically, for women, LGBT folks and other minorities.
**Buky Williams:** I am the Executive Director of Education as a Vaccine, which is an organisation that works to advance the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and young people.

**Chitra Nagarajan:** I work on issues of human rights, conflict, peacebuilding, and climate change. My mission is to inject feminism into mainstream peace and security spaces.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** If I understand correctly, all three of you are part of the Nigerian Feminist Forum?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** Yes, we are all part of the Feminist Forum, but we're also part of a bigger feminist network in Nigeria because the feminist network is larger than the Feminist Forum.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Can you clarify for me, then, what the Feminist Forum does and what the larger network does?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** The Nigerian Feminist Forum is an existing organisation, which does certain work, and then there's the broader feminist network which encompasses much more than what the Nigerian Feminist Forum does. So, if you talk about the Nigerian Feminist Forum, you're talking about a particular organisation, but if you're talking about feminist organising, it's much bigger than that and encompasses thousands of Nigerian women engaged in feminist organising.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Okay. Can you tell me then about your individual involvement in work on violence against women and girls in Nigeria?

**Chitra Nagarajan:** I've been working on issues of violence against women and girls in Nigeria for a long time. My work is primarily in conflict-affected communities

– strengthening systems, supporting service providers, and trying to change attitudes of security agents towards violence.

**Buky Williams:** The work we do at Education as a Vaccine is at two levels. At state level, we advocate for the implementation of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 in the states where it does not exist. At community level, we offer training to staff of sexual assault referral centres and run safe spaces.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** And Azeenarh?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** At TIERs, we provide responses to violence that is meted out to people in relation either to their gender identity or their sexual orientation, and also offer referral services and support to women who have been victims of violence.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What would you say some of your successes have been in the work that you do?

**Buky Williams:** One major success is the work we have done to ensure that community structures can respond to issues of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in a youth-friendly manner. We're also currently working in two states around the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act.

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** Part of the success that we've been able to build over the past few years has been trying to connect the LGBTI community to the wider feminist movement, and in that way, being able to internally check problematic things that have been known to happen within both the LGBTI and larger feminist community, such as sexism and homophobia.

**Chitra Nagarajan:** As a researcher, it's good to see my research reflected back to me in terms of the narratives that the NGO community is now using, and also how that then influences programming. I would also say what gives me joy is more defined successes: for example, seeing services improved, with greater provision to survivors, and better outreach. For example, last year, in an Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Borno, our advocacy efforts led to the leaders taking firm action to stop sexual exploitation from happening. For me, that's success. I would like to say that one

thing Azeenarh and Buky missed, when they were talking about successes, was the state of emergency regarding GBV that was declared in Nigeria earlier this year. Really, it was the feminist movement as a whole that was responsible for pushing this forward. I think that's really important, and it directly links to COVID-19 as well.

**Buky Williams:** Indeed. At the beginning of COVID-19, one of the things that we realised was happening in Nigeria was that nobody was taking sexual or gender-based violence seriously. To be quite honest, no one was really prepared. Sexual violence services were not considered essential and so there were no passes for service providers. We had no data to justify the need to the COVID-19 taskforce. We also saw really high-profile cases of young women who were killed. For a lot of us in the civil society movement, we were just really frustrated by the lack of response by the State.

That spurred us on to act and we came together as feminists to call for a state of emergency. That really picked up and blew up and people really got engaged and involved, you know. Governors' wives were pushing from one end, various civil society organisations were pushing from their end and governors were declaring states of emergency. Eventually, the House of Representatives put forward different resolutions and the government created an inter-ministerial committee.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Tell me more about the Violence Against Persons Act that was passed in 2015. To what extent would you say the Nigerian state is actually implementing the law that it has passed?

**Buky Williams:** To be quite honest, I'm going to say it's been very slow going. I think one of the biggest things was actually getting the law passed because it took over 14 years. And then when it got passed, it was really only in the Federal Capital Territory and in order for it to become national law, over two-thirds of the states actually have to pass it. Before COVID-19, depending on who you asked, 12 to 13 states had passed it at the time. And even though it had been passed, there was still a lot of work to be done in order to be able to actually ensure that it had an impact on the lives of all persons. We need Sexual Assault Referral Centres, for example. There are not enough across the country. That was part of the demands that were made when we talked about the state of emergency: the need to domesticate the

laws and for support systems to be put in place to be able to respond to SGBV, ensure that there are disciplinary measures in place for law enforcement officials who refused to assist survivors, ensure there are shelters, those kinds of things.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** You talked about 12 to 13 states having passed it before COVID-19. Do you have any sense of what the numbers are like now?

**Buky Williams:** The numbers now are about 15. We've added about three more states.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Is it safe to say that this is one of the silver linings of COVID-19?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** I think that would be stretching it. It's, I think, best to put it as a success of years of advocacy and pushing for it. I don't think COVID-19 added anything to be able to pass it in a couple more states.

**Buky Williams:** To some extent, though, I think I would say that what COVID-19 did was to amplify the issue of SGBV. I think the fact that there were so many conversations about it, and there were so many high-profile cases, and even governors had to say something about it, that was different. There was a lot of shame, especially among the governors' wives whose husbands hadn't passed it, especially when, thanks to the State of Emergency GBV campaign, maps showing which states had passed it and which states had not passed it were shared. So, COVID-19 definitely gave states a little more reason to pass it to show that they were actually doing something. I'm not saying that it's due to COVID-19, I'm just saying that COVID-19, like many things that are unfortunate, created an amplifying effect that gave more possibility of pushing forward this need to have legal frameworks in place to be able to respond to SGBV.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What were the circumstances under which the three of you came together to work on the OSIWA-funded report?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** All three of us have worked together on various projects, and we know that we have the same beliefs, and we have identified gaps over the years on things that we wanted to work on; so, when this opportunity presented

itself, we all took advantage of it to pitch in to produce the report because we believed in its importance.

**Buky Williams:** The truth of the matter is that we definitely have similar values and principles and we wanted to be able to dig deeper into issues that most people often think about, but not in an inclusive manner. Even before this work that OSIWA supported, we had thought about the idea of what an inclusive, gender-sensitive response to COVID-19 would be, because we could see that the Nigerian government was not even thinking about a gendered response, let alone an inclusive one. So, when Chitra came to us and said there was the possibility of being able to do more in-depth research, it was a no-brainer.

**Chitra Nagarajan:** I think we first started talking about this back in March 2020, when we saw what was happening in other countries and we began to get an indication of the gendered effects in terms of GBV, unpaid care work, and the impact on maternal mortality or access to abortion. All these are issues that we care about, but there wasn't that much discussion in Nigeria about the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and also what the response needed to be. And so we put together a policy paper – Buky and I together with Charmaine [Pereira], back in April 2020 – sketching out some of what we thought would happen in Nigeria and what the government needed to do. And then, on the back of that, we decided to put together a series of briefing papers because, at that time, many of the feminists that we knew were so focused on what was happening and trying to develop contingency plans for providing services to survivors that there was little time to reflect and write and document. And so, we wanted to put together something that would draw on feminist knowledge from across the country, to present documentation that drew from across the nation, and was influenced by feminist analysis. We were also interested in something that was as intersectional as we could make it. So, we're not just looking at impacts based on gender, but also issues around disability and sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** What, for you, were the most surprising things you found in putting together the report?

**Chitra Nagarajan:** I work so much in the space that I'm not sure too much surprises me, actually, but maybe I could say things that were not in the public sphere in Nigeria about the impact of COVID-19 on GBV were the new pieces of information. People were more or less knowledgeable, I think, about sexual violence and even intimate partner violence, but not necessarily about potential impacts of COVID-19 on early and forced marriage, on FGM, and then also violence in same-sex relationships, the increase in corrective rape of lesbian and bisexual women, how the pandemic was affecting LGBTQI people, etc. I think those were the new issues that our paper brought to the fore. These issues were not discussed in feminist and sexual violence spaces.

**Buky Williams:** I wouldn't say I was surprised by anything. I would say that it was important for this to be documented.

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** What really surprised me was how ill-prepared the government was. Even far into the pandemic, the people who were actually tasked with the job of response just left us hanging. Even though we were hearing the gendered aspects of what came out of COVID-19 in the reports from other countries around the world, we just seemed to be unprepared. Even when feminist groups tried to engage with the state and tried to ensure that certain services were in place, many states still just fought back or pushed back or were just uninterested. That took me a little by surprise.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So, what kinds of data did you draw on for this report? How did you go about finding the information, especially since you did the research during the time of COVID-19?

**Chitra Nagarajan:** It was very difficult because there isn't actually much data, all these months afterwards, and again, this is one of the failures, the gaps that the pandemic has exposed – the lack of a proper data-gathering system. And with the data that exists, I'm not sure how reliable it is because it seems to be taken from approximations. It was very difficult to come across figures on reporting even when we contacted service providers to ask for the number of cases that they had received monthly in the past year. There is some of that in the report, but most of the information came from talking to people working in the violence against women

space to find out the kinds of cases coming to them, as well as what they were hearing from the community, and the constraints they faced in doing prevention work and providing services during this time.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** So how then did women's groups respond to this new reality of the ways in which COVID-19 worsened the lives of marginalised communities?

**Buky Williams:** To be quite honest, I think it wasn't easy. So, just to give an example: in Abuja, the question was whether service providers would be able to move during restrictions – would they be able to get passes to enable them to move, and would they get Personal Protective Equipment to be able to protect themselves during COVID-19? Some colleagues were going out anyway to ensure that survivors were moved out of harm's way and were being harassed by law enforcement officials as they did that. There was lobbying on a case-by-case basis for the government to give passes to those who were providing services, but that took time to get. A lot of the work moved online. Groups like ours publicised phone numbers on SMS platforms to ensure that people could still call for help if they had access to their own mobile phones.

There were cases recorded online and we had to follow through with them to identify which services were available, and co-raise funds as needed to really ensure that we could respond, but the truth of the matter is some services were no longer available and some shelters closed down because they said that they could not take people in during COVID-19 unless they were tested. That is literally what happened until the government eased restrictions [in late May, early June depending on the state]. A lot of people were stuck with their abusers, even if they sought for help, until something could be done about that, and that was really frustrating. The issue of data was also a really critical issue. I mean, we had been talking since March about how to create a centralised data system to improve the coordination between service providers and social welfare officers who receive the reports, but the situation room was not launched until late in November 2020.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Did you have to come up with new strategies for your work in this time period?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** I would say that we've had to adapt to the realities of the day instead of coming up with new strategies. The ways in which we worked were no longer possible; the tools we relied on had to be adjusted and adapted to deal with the reality of COVID-19, and we also had to learn to access new spaces. Buky gave the example of how we resorted to more online campaigning, and how Chioma from TechHer, with the support of other groups, drew a map, which then gave people a visual impression of the issue.

Now, because a lot of people were at home relying on their devices, instead of diversifying our resources, we could concentrate and target people in the spaces where they were operating, and that map, for example, created a wall of shame that made such a huge impact. People now started advocating within their spaces saying, "Oh I didn't know that my state had not domesticated the law, and I'm going to push to ensure that it happens." To a certain extent, it also allowed various women's rights groups, and people working for minorities, to collaborate and see how they could work better. I know that, at least, in the south of Nigeria where I work, the ways that we ran safe spaces and shelters needed a little bit of adjustment. So, we haven't changed; we have basically adapted and adjusted.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Buky, would you say the same thing?

**Buky Williams:** Definitely, because I think a lot of us were already functioning online. It was just really adapting it to be able to respond and finding different ways, because it was not just like in normal times where you would be able to refer people easily. It was a lot of work figuring out what was feasible in this situation. As always, we had to leverage personal relationships to know who to call and so on. We also were disturbing the peace in certain WhatsApp groups where we knew there were government officials, getting them annoyed so as to be able to highlight some of these issues. There were all of these things that we had to do and then of course, there were the endless Zoom meetings!

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Would you say you've developed new relationships with groups that work on violence against girls and women in this time period?

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** I personally haven't, and I don't think the folks at TIERs have either, but Chitra, who spent most of the time researching the issue, might be able to speak more firmly and clearly on that.

**Chitra Nagarajan:** I think there was some level of people coming together on the issue of violence against girls, particularly at the state level, even before the pandemic and, as far as I'm aware, that continued. I don't know what Buky thinks, but I haven't really seen people coming together in ways that they were not before. And then, of course, you had feminists coming together around the state of emergency so, maybe, that was the new kind of collaboration.

**Buky Williams:** I would say the one particular issue we came together to address was the lack of a database of service providers across the country. There wasn't anywhere you could go to find somewhere to refer people to if they called you from any part of the country seeking services, and we really needed that during COVID-19. So, in the Federal Capital Territory, UNDP and Women in Africa called meetings to discuss this, and we started to collect and collate this information. I don't think we had been able to bring that many people together at the national level in a long while. The meetings died down over time, but the information that was collected exists.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Right. So, if I said, look beyond 2021, what would you hope would have changed?

**Chitra Nagarajan:** Before we get to that, I really think that we can't discuss the pandemic without talking about the End SARS movement which happened during the pandemic, given that feminist activists were really part of the mobilisation, trying to make the links between campaigning against police brutality and women's rights. Buky and Azeenarh, you guys were really involved in it, would you like to say anything?

**Buky Williams:** Where to start on that one? COVID-19 really amplified the level of frustration with the government and its mismanagement of things. Let's go back in terms of even the work that we're doing in highlighting gender and COVID-19, and the fact that even to date the government and taskforce are still doing a very

poor job of integrating gender into their response. What people are demanding in the End SARS movement is very simple: we want an end to the brutality from a very specific segment of the Nigerian police. But we also have to remember that we saw this brutality happen during COVID-19, in which there were deaths during the enforcement of restrictions. No matter what state you were in, market women were shot; I know service providers who were harassed at different checkpoints when moving about to provide services, even when they showed a pass. A lot of that happened. Even women who needed to give birth or who needed to visit the hospital for various things were still facing a lot of harassment and a lot of extortion. The case of the man whose car was taken over by SARS just raised this issue again. There was a very clear message to the government: we want you to close down the units. Young people really drove that movement and seeing the power of young women really come alive in terms of coordination and support was amazing. They contributed in a way that shows that when women, who have been fighting this battle for centuries, come together, really amazing things happen. The way the government clamped down and responded just showed that they're not ready to listen to the citizens of this country. They're not ready to change in any way, shape or form. They say they're addressing the concerns of the End SARS movement, while still arresting protesters, while still blaming them for the looting and the unrest. For me, this just shows that our government is not capable of responding to crises and not capable of responding to the changing times. All they really care about is themselves and staying in power.

**Azeenarh Mohammed:** So, for me, one of my big takeaways from this was actually from a post that I had seen from someone who said that for the first time in Nigeria, the word "feminist" is on everybody's lips, in every newspaper, and it is not in a negative way. For the longest time in Nigeria, people have seen feminism or the F word generally as something that we should be ashamed of using and we have clamped down on people who identified as feminist. Nigerians have taken feminism to mean misandry or trying to destroy women, lesbians who kill children, and all the negative ways in which feminism can be seen.

However, during the End SARS movement, all of a sudden, being a feminist was seen as a good thing because at the forefront of the organising was the Feminist Coalition, a group of young women who just took charge and everybody could

see how transparent they were, how proactive they were in many other spaces. So, there was, all of a sudden, an acknowledgement that feminism meant more than how they had perceived it. And people were more open to identifying as feminist or supporting the work that feminists did. And while they were involved with the protests, they also actively tried to push feminist discourse, one of justice and equality and diversity and acceptance. So, for me, that was the big takeaway, and it was a big deal because we were in the middle of COVID-19, and people decided that COVID-19 was not the biggest issue. Even at the time that COVID-19 was destroying the lives of Nigerians, this organisation or group of police that have been brutalising people for such a long time was a worthy cause for young people, for human rights advocates to organise around and to be able to push for change. And we saw how effective that was in bringing the government to the table for at least two to three weeks before there was a brutal clampdown using force and violence by the State. So, I think 2020 is going to be significantly remembered for COVID-19, but it will also be remembered for the End SARS movement and the role that not just feminists, but young feminist women, played in that.

**Chitra Nagarajan:** Absolutely. And I think for me, it's very telling that the two biggest movements or topics of conversation in Nigeria in 2020, the state of emergency and the End SARS movement, had feminists at the forefront. I agree with Buky and Azeenarh: End SARS was integral to the feminist struggle, and feminists were integral to End SARS.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Would it be a fair assessment to say that, in Nigeria, the year 2020 was about COVID-19, but also women rising up and saying they've had enough?

**Buky Williams:** I would say it's not that women haven't been rising up to say "enough". I think, though, that for the first time, there was the recognition of the organising and mobilising power of women who have been saying "enough is enough". A friend of mine pointed out that the fact that women have been organising around the issue for a long time made us more effective in being able to coordinate, and in getting everyone to understand the issues, and what could be done. I mean, the ability of the Feminist Coalition to raise so much money within

two weeks[1], and then to disburse it to so many different groups, and to get together a legal network to respond as people were bringing up issues and needs, was pretty incredible. I think it just showed what feminist organising looked like in ways that Nigerians had not respected or seen as beneficial to them.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Right. So, it wasn't so much that this was new. It was that, for the first time, the larger community began to appreciate what this work is important for and what this work can do for them, whether they were feminist or not.

**Buky Williams:** Yeah, but you know, I think we should also strike a note of caution that this also came with a lot of backlash. A lot of vitriol was levelled against the Feminist Coalition for releasing a statement saying that everyone needed to be respected and that queer people were part of the movement. They were told to focus on the issues at hand. A lot of people used that as a reason to discredit them. A lot of people who were sympathetic towards them – even some feminists – were saying that the statement was the beginning of the end. That's how the government ended up cracking down on them. That was a divisive phase, and it was really frustrating. There was so much vitriol targeted at them, so we haven't fixed it yet, but at least, we must recognise that there is a different level of respect. And, we have a new narrative that we can use whenever they want to come at us with their nonsense.

**Akosua K. Darkwah:** Yes. I think this is the perfect place to end the conversation. Thank you ever so much.

## References

Nagarajan, Chitra. 2020. *Gender and COVID-19 in Nigeria: Violence Against Women and Girls*. Abuja: OSIWA. Available at https://www.genderandCOVID-19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Gender-and-COVID-19-in-Nigeria.pdf

Nwankwor, Chiedo and Nkereuwem, Elor. 2020. "How women helped rally mass protests against Nigeria's police corruption." *The Washington Post*, 4 November. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/04/how-women-helped-rally-mass-protests-against-nigerias-police-corruption

1 Chiedo Nwankwor and Elor Nkereuwem note that the Feminist Coalition raised the equivalent of US$388, 000 over a two-week period (Nwankwor and Nkereuwem, 2020).

# Intimate Archives: Rethinking Gender in African Studies

## Srila Roy and Caio Simões De Araújo speak with Simidele Dosekun, Oluwakemi M. Balogun and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué

On 14 April 2021, the *Governing Intimacies: Sexualities, Gender and Governance in the Postcolonial World* research project, convened by Associate Professor Srila Roy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, hosted a webinar discussion between Oluwakemi M. Balogun (University of Oregon), Simidele Dosekun (London School of Economics), and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué (University of Wisconsin) about their recently published books: *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* (Balogun, 2020); *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (Dosekun, 2020), and *Gender, Separatist Politics and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (Mougoué, 2019). The webinar was organised and hosted by Professor Srila Roy and Dr Caio Simões De Araújo.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Simidele Dosekun:** Thank you very much, Srila, for the invitation to be here today and to be in conversation with Jacqueline and Kemi. It's a particular pleasure to be here, it's enriching and affirming actually, because all our work is in close conversation.

To briefly introduce my book, it is about young, hyper-stylised, class-privileged Nigerian women in the city of Lagos who dress in what I call a "spectacularly feminine style". I mean "spectacularly feminine" mostly in a descriptive sense: it refers to a style of dress characterised by the use of heavy makeup, long weaves and wigs, false nails, false eyelashes and the highest of heels and so on. The central question of the book is, "What kind of femininity is being performed in and through this style?" or, more simply put, "How does the stylised subject, whom I refer to as 'the spectacularly feminine Lagos woman', see herself, as what

kind of gendered self and otherwise constituted self?" To answer these questions, I conducted interviews in 2013 with 18 women in Lagos who dress in the style. What I very much heard from them is that, individually and all the more so in combination, the different elements of their dress, the different fashion and beauty technologies, promise to beautify, to feminise and thereby to armour and bolster a woman. The women whom I interviewed suggested or explained that the dress gives, or at least promises to give, self-confidence; it "empowers", in short.

But, according to these women, not just any woman can do the style or pull it off. To successfully achieve and embody the spectacularly feminine look is not easy; it is hard work, it is expensive, it requires know-how, as well as the "right" dispositions and mentalities. For instance, echoing common stereotypes that women who are highly invested in fashion and beauty are shallow, superficial and so on, the women in my project sought to dissociate from this by saying, "I'm not that type of woman, I'm not shallow, I have depth, I have substance."

So putting all this together, in the book I argue that both for what the spectacular style of dress promises and for being the kinds of women able to do the style, the women I interviewed see themselves as not merely empowered but also self-empowering in and through their style of dress. I read or frame all this in terms of the concept of "postfeminism". By postfeminism, I mean a popular, highly mediated, highly consumerist cultural formation and sensibility concerning the putative pastness and redundancy of feminism for certain kinds of women, for women who are "already empowered".

**Oluwakemi M. Balogun:** Thank you so much, Srila, for inviting me. I want to echo what Simi said, that the synergies between our work are really gratifying. In my book, I make an argument around a key concept: "beauty diplomacy". What got me interested in the topic of beauty pageants in Nigeria was that I was visiting the country and noticed that pageants were really part of the urban landscape, specifically in Lagos. I was interested in the ways in which beauty pageants were being used to promote not only expected elements like fashion and cosmetics, but also other industries such as tourism, as well as social issues like peace, and the nation too.

In the book, I start off with the celebration around Nigeria winning the 2001 Miss World pageant, which was also the very first time a Black woman of African descent won – Agbani Darego. There was a lot of celebration and optimism about the win,

and politicians and government officials were lauding it as an example of Nigeria's future trajectory. I use this example as a way of making sense of, and laying the foundation for, the concept of "beauty diplomacy", which refers to the fact that the work that women do in the beauty pageant industry, particularly beauty queens, is seen as a way of promoting positive images of Nigeria as a country, especially in a context where the global narrative around Nigeria is so negative. I tie the idea of beauty diplomacy to the concept of "aesthetic capital", specifically exploring the ways in which beauty queens have to present themselves as having "the total package", that is, not just physical beauty but also internal dispositions that are seen as virtuous, and as responsible. They also have to show that they are upwardly mobile and that they are making moves to better their own lives and careers, as well as better the lives of others, working for the public social good. Speaking to the question of "empowerment", oftentimes this was represented through the idea of having a voice, having a particular office that beauty queens work to cultivate, in terms of leveraging their title to not only do charity work but to also try to lobby politicians to focus on particular social issues that they are passionate about. In such ways, the contestants would often flip stereotypes about beauty queens being insignificant, shallow, disempowered and so on, claiming, "I have this voice and this access that I find to be empowering."

At the same time, I argue that the kind of access to power the beauty queens claim, and the idea that succeeding in beauty pageants is self-empowering for the contestants, has different kinds of costs and tensions. Oftentimes, the beauty contestants would tell me that, given the public attention they received, they had very high expectations around their access to economic capital: they have to dress in particular ways, they are expected to drive specific types of cars, and these kinds of things were difficult because they didn't always have the cash to back up such economic expectations. They would also talk about the public scrutiny that came with their fame: they wouldn't want to do things like take a public bus, for instance, because if they are seen on a public bus, they ran the risk of being splashed in the tabloids. This is part of the argument that I make around gender and power in the book, thinking about how "beauty diplomacy" gives the contestants some semblance of mobility and access to social capital and social networks, but is also truncated and constrained.

**Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué:** Thank you, Srila and Caio. I'm really excited to be here today, especially with two amazing scholars whose work I really admire and whose work my students have also read. We've talked at length about these issues, beauty politics, and how various ideas about race, gender and class – we have to talk about class – shape ideas about being feminine, being an "ideal woman", within African settings.

My book focuses on two main themes: gender and everyday nationalism. I wanted to highlight how women's everyday, ordinary actions were politicised in Cameroon in the 1960s and in the early 1970s. These everyday actions play a role in political movements that are often seen and remembered in history as having men at the forefront. One of the things that I uncovered, and was surprised about, was that women's roles and political movements are not always radical and overt but instead can be conservative and subtle and, to be very clear, still make a profound and lasting impact.

The women I focus on in the book are formally educated women, female political elites and government officials' wives. These women worked within patriarchal confines when trying to achieve two multilayered goals. The first was to advance women's social and political rights. The second was to play a key role in the larger, Anglophone nationalist political movement and project of identity-building in Cameroon in the 1960s and early 1970s. These women did not label themselves as "feminists". But I maintain in the book that they engage with what some gender studies scholars call "feminist actions", behaviours that supported women's advancement and equality in diverse areas of their lives.

I argue that the formally educated women my work focuses on accessed social and political power by invoking what I call "embodied nationalism". I understand this as a type of nationalism in which individuals embody identity through performance, emotional expression, and visual representation. The elite women believed that women's everyday patterns of behaviour and comportment might project a suitable Anglophone persona – the clothes that women wore, the foods that they cooked, their refraining from gossip, whether or not they followed appropriate marital behaviour such as not challenging their husbands' male authority by chasing them in public, or beating their husbands' mistresses! They also believed that all this mattered for Anglophone women to distinguish themselves from French-speaking Cameroonian women like myself. I can tell you that doing oral interviews was quite interesting. For example, I would have people look me in the eye and say

French-speaking women from Cameroon don't know how to cook and clean, and consequently, I tried to defend myself by saying, "I can cook and also clean!" So, in short, I argue that the educated female elite invoked embodied nationalism to construct visual representations and emotional or affective practices of ideal Anglophone womanhood within urban settings. So how women *feel* matters. This is one of the things I love about Simi and Kemi's work in terms of how we're all looking at beauty politics; that it is not just about what women are wearing, it's also about their internal psyche: how does one feel? How does one connect one's emotions to one's clothing and so on?

**Caio Simões De Araújo:** Thank you so much to all the speakers. One question we have received from the audience is for Kemi, asking whether, in light of the riots following the Miss World pageant in Abuja and Kaduna in 2002, you address the sense in which beauty pageants point to divides within Nigeria on the basis of region and religion. The second question could be for you all. It is whether the women you researched were performing a kind of self-empowering agency of the type that Saba Mahmood described in her book, *Politics of Piety* (2011), the kind of agency that inhabits the norm and is not against it. And if this is the case, what implications does this strategy have for the struggle of women in the Global South?

**Oluwakemi M. Balogun:** I have a chapter in my book where I talk specifically about the Miss World protests and what happened in 2002, where I spin out some of the competing ways in which women's bodies were framed by both those in support of the pageant and those opposed to it. I show that both camps rely on similar narratives of women's bodies needing to be protected symbolically. So women's bodies become a rhetorical tool for thinking about national perspectives, and thinking about the ways in which national identities and ideas about the nation are always going to be contested and fraught – and, in this case, speak to some of the faultlines in Nigeria around region, religion, ethnicity, different interpretations of "culture" and of the trajectory that Nigeria should or shouldn't take.

**Simidele Dosekun:** The question about agency is quite a useful one. It helps me articulate a question that I also had for Jacqueline - the question being about the nature, and we could even say the effects or results of the kind of performance

of agency and self-empowerment that the women in both our projects were performing, or in Jacqueline's case study, advocating for other women. Were all these women challenging or inhabiting the norm? Maybe it's an unsatisfactory answer, but I think the answer is a bit of both. Certainly, I am very ambivalent about a lot of the things that I heard from the women whom I interviewed, and Jacqueline, to connect it to your work, you often use a phrase like "progressive but conservative" to describe the women in your project. I think, in Kemi's project as well, in a different kind of way, it's like women are pushing forward certain kinds of norms, certain kinds of ideas about women's rights and women's opportunities and so on, but at the same time there's a deep strain of conservatism as well.

**Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué:** Yes, it is indeed a really important question because it really does highlight many tensions in how agency is connected to body politics and even political structures. As a historian, I thought it was essential to highlight how women at the time I was researching might have identified themselves, and to try to not connect that too much to how I understood what feminism is today, and also to realise that the women's actions may not be radical and overt in terms of them being out on the street. But, still, they are making changes nevertheless, in very subtle ways.

In my work, what we see are women's organisations choosing to affiliate themselves with male-dominated parties, to get funding, for example, and they use that funding to train women to become politicians, to start sports organisations for women. Once, when I was presenting this work, much earlier on, someone in the audience said these are not feminist actions, and I had to emphasise that we're talking about feminist actions within African settings and that it unravels in different ways. Ideas about feminist actions vary and are based on different factors such as socio-economic positioning.

**Caio Simões De Araújo:** There is another question for Kemi, asking for your position on the argument on whether beauty contests solicit women's conformity to Eurocentric standards of beauty, especially in the context that you mentioned, of the Miss World Pageant. And then there's a question for Simi, asking for your thoughts on how trans women can be read within a postfeminist framework. I just want to also add a comment to that. In my own research, I did interview quite a few trans women in Mozambique and I found quite fascinating that what you

describe is very much the discourse that I heard from them as well, in terms of beauty as an armour. I think that's another fascinating point.

**Srila Roy:** There's another question: "Would it be possible to characterise these kinds of feminism as distinctly African?" If I can just tag on my question here, too. I am really interested in the spectre of feminism that's haunting this conversation: it's come out a little more now in the discussion, this sense that the subjects in all your work might be "insufficiently" or "inadequately" feminist, if at all. I wonder: what are the kinds of expectations that feminism evokes? What is the spectre of feminism that we are invoking when we're judging the subjects as being insufficiently radical or "bad", and so on? Yet another question on feminism: "To what extent does feminism as a politics emerging in the 1960s, reanimated in the 1990s, function as a kind of foil against which women in your studies can assert moral authority or membership in a moral community?"

**Oluwakemi M. Balogun:** I do think it's interesting that, in all of our cases, there's ways in which access to power is – I think Simi has already mentioned – constrained within a system. The ways in which the women talk about access to power is very much individualised, it's very much about this self-empowerment route, about one gaining access to particular forms of power. Maybe there is something about the fact that all of us are also talking about women who are on the whole pretty privileged. What does that mean in terms of access to power and the forms of feminist politics in which one engages?

I think the reference to Saba Mahmood's work (2011) is really helpful because there are ways of thinking about agency that might not on its face be seen as resistance, and what do we make of that in terms of power, what do we make of that in terms of particular forms of feminist politics? I think there's something to be said for how that allows us to reimagine feminism outside of a Western gaze.

In response to the question on Eurocentrism, I definitely think the critique around global pageants as Eurocentric is a fair one, because if we look at the winners over time, there are certain patterns we see. Even though, now, those that are considered to be the most competitive tend to be from the Global South, from countries like Venezuela or the Philippines, there is a critique that even those

who win at national levels in these and other countries in the Global South tend to be lighter-skinned. In the context of Nigeria, I found that the question of pageants sending contestants, whether lighter- or darker-skinned, to the global competition was more strategic than I assumed. The pageant organisers would often tell me that, for example, having a darker skinned contestant at particular pageants was more competitive because the global pageants expected Nigerian contestants to be darker. And that was some kind of a leg up because it made the contestants more "exotically" beautiful. So it didn't pan out universally that only lighter-skinned contestants won.

**Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué**: I want to add to what Kemi was saying and take us back to the 1960s; in the chapter in my book on beauty pageants, there is an awareness about an increasingly global idea about what beauty norms are, not only for women but for Black women specifically. The audience at the beauty pageants I consider in the book would say, "We want someone dark-skinned with an Afro," and then, if that person didn't win, people would be writing letters to their local officials talking about the pageants being rigged. I think it's also important to know or talk about how participants beyond the contestants themselves are engaging in conversations about Black beauty. In the 1960s, they also responded to what was going on among African Americans in the US and ideas about the "Black is beautiful" movement. I see this engagement spilling out onto the beauty pageant stages in Cameroon in the 1960s.

**Simidele Dosekun**: On the question about whether the feminisms in our work – well, if we're even calling them feminisms or not – the question, is are they distinctly African? I would say, certainly in my own book, no. I make an argument for postfeminism as a transnational sensibility. I don't argue that it's in any way unique to Nigeria. But what I tried to do in the work, through what the women said in the interviews, was to show how postfeminism as a transnationally circulating, highly mediated, highly consumer sensibility articulates with local ideas and sensibilities on the ground, so maybe forming something that is distinctly Nigerian in the detail of it. But I think the broad logics certainly are not unique to the Nigerian or African contexts.

And then to speak to the question about feminism as a kind of foil, feminism as a certain standard against which, perhaps, we are judging or analysing all our data and our research participants. I know these lines get blurred for me in my

mind, and certainly in my speaking about my work; hopefully, the lines are clearer in the book itself. For me, the critique in the book is not about the women as individual subjects; it's really about the cultural repertoires and the discourse, the postfeminist discourse, and also the promises that postfeminism makes. That's where my critique is located. I argue that postfeminism is seductive – the idea that "you can have it all", "you can be it all", who would say no to that in a sense, right? It's seductive, it's glossy. So the critique is not "Why would a woman take up this kind of position?" The critique is more that the position that is on offer is quite hollow, ultimately. And also, I heard this from the women, in reference to their beauty practice, that it ends up being difficult but also painful to inhabit and to embody, to push oneself out into the world as a kind of confident woman who can "do it all", who can "have it all", when in fact there are very brute structures and logics militating against women that, of course, still remain, that one runs into.

**Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué**: On the question about African feminism, I want to combine it with another question I am also interested in: how the women in our studies themselves analyse the places of power they're seeking to access. Do they have critiques of the power structures that they must engage with, or are they simply trying to negotiate a pathway in?
This is a crucial question because it also brings into the fold the roles that traditional women's organisations play, particularly in my work. So, I don't want anybody in the audience leaving and thinking, "Okay, so you have these formal women's organisations connected to the male-dominated states, and that's it." But, on the other hand, we also have in play traditional women's organisations that have their own ideas about moral codes and the roles that women play in essentially navigating these moral codes or doling out punishments. And so a lot of the women's organisations that I was looking at, I saw that they were taking local ideas about women's political power in terms of ideas about what gender equality looks like to them, what feminist actions look like to them. But, still, they were also drawing on ideas about gender beyond these.

I would see these contradictions in terms of how women should behave. You have, for example, female journalists who would say, 'Okay, women, you shouldn't be chastising your husband in public, you should not be beating him, you need to control yourself." But then, if, say, the husband didn't provide money to feed his family, they would then draw from traditional ideas from local women's

organisations about how to work that out. So, you will have female journalists in the next column say, 'Okay, gather your friends, your neighbours, and you may all get together, chastise him, and shame him for essentially deviating from dominant ideas of gender norms for men." So they're drawing from different spaces and ideas about feminist actions and how these unfold. What I found really fascinating in my work, particularly when I was looking at the conclusion and addressing the political landscape of Cameroon today, is that traditional women's organisations come to the forefront when there are serious political grievances. The women's organisations that are connected to the state are, sort of, put to the side.

**Srila Roy**: Thank you all so much. I think the discussion only suggests how much this is the beginning of a discussion, it's generative at so many different levels. I mean, "Rethinking Gender", as we've called the webinar series, is a platform for rethinking the nation, for rethinking belonging, for rethinking race, class, affect, and ultimately, now, we've come to rethinking feminism. I'd like to say, as a final thing, that it also always strikes me, of course, in my own work on Indian feminism, how much our feminisms still operate as a foil to Western feminisms. So, the questions are always around what is distinctive about African feminism and, in my context, it would be South Asian feminism. I wonder if that puts us in this slightly awkward position where it maybe narrows the scope to really think about the multiplicity of our feminisms and the multiple political and conflicting legacies in the way, I think, Jacqueline's historical work really brings forth, and the multiple temporalities of the so-called neo-liberal globalised moment. I think I don't want to hear the question about the African or the Asian feminism anymore! I want to actually explode that a bit, to say, well, you know, we also have multiple feminisms and they're all kind of difficult and complicated, and women, queer folk, whoever, attach to these in very, very different and difficult ways. Thank you all again.

## References

Balogun, Oluwakemi M. 2020. *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.

Dosekun, Simidele. 2020. *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2011. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist*

*Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mougoué, Jacqueline-Bethel T. 2019. *Gender, Separatist Politics and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

# Bouncing Back and Developing Elasticity During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Intergenerational Partnerships and Interventions Among Grassroots Women's Organisations to Address COVID-19 Related Challenges in Rural Western Cape, South Africa

Vainola Makan and Wendy Pekeur

> *"With the emergence of collaborative efforts between younger and older communities in online spaces, we see the power of intergenerational cooperation. When we coalesce to discuss solutions and mobilise together, there are new and reimagined opportunities to wield our collective knowledge and resources to tackle COVID-19 and other systemic injustices of social exclusion and power."* (Sato, 2020)

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified pre-existing inequalities and social challenges that have existed for many decades. Poor communities, rural women, farm dwellers, the elderly, and youth are some of the sectors most acutely impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic has had an acute impact on women and fractured the relationship between adult and younger women. The prediction is that, in a crisis situation, the social cohesion between generations will weaken as the different interests of the two groups come to the fore. The assumption that young and adult women are automatically at loggerheads and that their interests are irreconcilable in such contexts has been refuted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper outlines interventions by two organisations and highlights how young and older women have worked together to build platforms for resilience for high risk communities during the pandemic.

## Social, Economic and Political Context

As elsewhere, women in South Africa bear the brunt of the impact of COVID-19. The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey estimates that three million people in South Africa lost their jobs during the initial lockdown period between February and April 2020. According to government reports, women accounted for two-thirds of this total, although they make up half the workforce. Job losses impacted the poor and vulnerable to a greater degree, with the poorest ten per cent experiencing the greatest percentage of over 55% reduction in employment. Recent research shows that the percentage of people who ran out of money for food in 2020 had likely increased from 25% to 47% in South Africa. The percentage of "children going hungry over the past seven days" was also expected to nearly double from 8,0% to 15,2%.

- The national economy is expected to contract by at least 7,2%.
- Due to higher levels of inequality, which contributes to increases in violent crime, we could see murder increase by 3,45% to 3,75% solely due to COVID-19.
- Non-profit organisations are reporting an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) reports since lockdown eased and a change in the nature of reports: more aggressive behaviour due to increased stress.

## Who We Are

Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement (Ubuntu) is a non-profit organisation that has operated in rural communities in the Western Cape since 2011. Sisterhood Movement is a movement by young women and teen girls established in 2016. Ubuntu Founder and Coordinator, Wendy Pekeur, started the voluntary project which had no funding and no paid staff for eight years. Since 2019, a paid administrative assistant has been recruited, but the bulk of Ubuntu's paralegal work, is done by Wendy Pekeur. Vainola Makan co-founded the Sisterhood Movement with teen girls from a farming community. The movement has led several programme interventions over the past six years, including leadership development at youth camps, Youth Day events, human trafficking, entrepreneurship, environmental programmes, as well as understanding feminism and gender training. The girls in the Sisterhood Movement have also run annual community projects with the support of the Ubuntu Coordinator. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Ubuntu and Sisterhood

Movement worked with young women and teens who have been part of these two organisations for the past couple of years. The younger women tended to be out-of-school youths, unemployed students, and matriculates and teens who were in school but had attended no school during the first months of lockdown due to the closure of schools, compared to 50% attendance when schools reopened. These young women from the communities saw the lack of access to information about government support as well as the lack of literacy skills to access this support, and expressed an eagerness to support those who needed assistance in this regard in their free time. We allowed them to be involved as volunteers on specific tasks while the adult women took charge of other tasks.

## Human Rights Defenders in a Time of COVID-19

Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution, which is the cornerstone of our democracy, provides that: "Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water." To give effect to this right, Parliament enacted the Water Services Act 108 of 1997 which places a duty on all spheres of government to ensure that water and sanitation services are provided in a manner which is efficient, equitable, and sustainable. COVID-19 exposed the inequalities that exist in many communities where food and water are scarce resources. We found that the lack of these resources had a great impact on people's right to live dignified lives. To mitigate the effects of water scarcity, we intervened in four communities, ensuring people enjoyed fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. The interventions led by the older women included engaging municipalities, disaster management on a local level, escalating to Provincial Government when responses were slow, and, in one instance, engaging the National Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform for a speedy intervention. Several communities that were without water at different times in the lockdown have been assisted. Some of these communities had been without water for some time and the reasons for the lack differed from place to place. We realised the importance of engaging different spheres of government to ensure that the right to water was achieved. Access to water was restored in two communities and water was delivered as the need arose in two other communities. Women, who carry a greater burden of household duties and preparing meals, now had the comfort of water in proximity. With the high levels of GBV in South Africa, we realised the risks when women have to fetch water far from their homes and worked to address them.

## Access to Food and Dignity in a Time of COVID

"How can I live a life of dignity when I have to beg to stay alive?" This was a powerful rhetorical question posed by Gertruida Baartman, a former seasonal farm worker from a rural town in the Western Cape. This question is pertinent when we try to understand women's relationships to land and food in South Africa. In a country that has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world, hunger is a reality for many. People who live below the breadline struggle to make ends meet. COVID-19 further worsened the hardships of many women like Gertruida. Their movement was restricted as they found themselves unemployed and far removed from shopping malls and urban centres. Food parcels and humanitarian support became a new way of surviving the pandemic. They had to travel long distances to the farm gates to collect the hampers. They did not complain though. "We do not know what we would have eaten if it was not for the food hamper", is the story we heard in many places. Something that seems so insignificant became an important part of Herstory in lockdown. Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement held workshops on food sovereignty and women's access to land in this period and older women assisted more than 300 women with seeds. These women used the seeds to start or expand new household food gardens and two communal gardens. The women had lots of indigenous knowledge on growing crops which they learnt as children and brought to bear on the garden projects. A lot of seed sharing as well as crop sharing has also happened, where the women share their produce with others.

## Running Soup Kitchens

With support from foundations and private donors, as well as proceeds from the household food gardens, 18 women volunteered to run several soup kitchens across four different communities. Older women aged between 35 and 55 were in charge of running the soup kitchens which were able to feed approximately 2,000 people daily. They prepared and served the meals. The younger students and unemployed youth volunteers assisted by sanitising people and ensuring social distancing at the food lines.

## Support for the Unemployed

We supported hundreds of workers who lost their jobs in this period. Our activities, led by the older women, included assisting with Unemployment Insurance claims,

engaging employers when there was non-payment and, finally, tracking to ensure that employees did get the monies due them. There were many good moments when workers finally received their monies after long processes and frequent disputes. There are also cases that were never resolved, where no answers were offered as to why no monies were paid out. Employers claimed they applied, but the Department of Labour system either did not find the employees registered in their system or the applications were still pending. Labour broker workers e.g., cleaners, seasonal workers, and migrant workers, were among those workers who did not receive answers. Seeking answers on the Minister of Labour's Facebook page or with the Department of Labour officials still did not lead anywhere. We are still bringing pressure to bear on the relevant authorities, knocking on different doors and reporting those employers who are in violation of labour laws.

## Accessing the R350 COVID-19 Grant

Students and unemployed youth aged between 18 and 24 focused a lot of their energy on assisting with the registration of unemployed citizens for the government R350 COVID-19 social relief grant. Having been trained on how to apply for the grant and armed with mobile phones which allowed them to fill the application form online, young women volunteers worked diligently. Finding some people with no identity documents and no bank accounts, they worked tirelessly to register everyone so they could have access to the funds. Hundreds of applicants received the grant. The long lines at Post Offices, including people queuing overnight, showed the great need people had to access the grants as this was the only source of income they could have. More than 1,000 people were assisted and received the grant in this period. The youth were keen to assist, as they were told at the beginning of lockdown that older people were more at risk of contracting the Coronavirus. By doing this work and helping older people, they were not only aiming to get people an emergency income, but also to save lives.

## Support for Those Locked Down with Their Perpetrators

Rural women face multiple burdens, due to the fact that they are women, the fact that they are black, and as a result of their marginalisation. The lockdown came with many challenges, as some women were now stuck with their abusers behind closed doors. Police stations were a no-go area, and one court had a notice stating that

no protection orders would be given if there was no case number and no physical violence. We know this because we were part of a group of young and older women from civil society who did court monitoring.

Our first intervention involved a mother with three minor children. Receiving death threats and fearing for her life, she made a choice to get out of the situation she was in. Although we discussed her escape, she changed her mind on the day of the escape because it was not yet safe to do so. Eventually, we found ourselves leaving home in the early hours to pick her and the children up at a place that she earmarked. As two women driving alone, we were not sure if it might be a hoax or whether it would be safe, having no permit to be on the road and still taking a chance as we needed to make sure a mother and her children were safe. We found them dressed in pyjamas and masks at a nearby school. The little one, a girl five years old and clearly talkative, kept us occupied as we drove to the nearest police station, awaiting the social worker who could assist the family to be taken to a safe home. Three hours later, screening was done, all necessary forms completed, and we saw her and the children off to the most amazing home for abused women and their children. "You should be strong leaders one day", we said to the two young girls, who reluctantly waved goodbye to us.

The second case soon followed, then two more. One case involved orphans who were left to fend for themselves. Women in communities started to take in temporarily women who needed a refuge while we were engaging shelters and the police. This was to ensure that the woman was safe while the necessary processes were followed. Much needed to be done; women and children were the ones suffering most, having to leave the place they called home in order to be safe from harm. Law reform and action on the part of all stakeholders is urgently needed.

While the older women focused on retrieving women and children from violent situations and finding them alternative accommodation, the students worked on a campaign. The Sisterhood teen girls launched their GBV campaign on 16 June -Youth Day in South Africa. They engaged girls to discuss the importance of eliminating violence against women and girls. They went further in getting 50 girls from different rural towns together to talk about the danger of human trafficking on International Day of the Girl Child. The girls engaged and shared stories. A self-defence and safety demonstration was a key part of the session. The girls decided to go out into more communities to share the knowledge. They all decided on a safe word, which was aimed at protecting themselves. They learnt the important

helpline numbers for human trafficking and child abuse. These girls eventually participated in an annual girls' camp focused on the theme "Developing leadership among young women to mitigate the impact of Covid on young women".

## Building Capacity with Community Leaders: Paralegal Training

An important part of the work during COVID-19 was to train women in different communities around their constitutional, health, domestic violence, labour and land rights. This work, led by the older women, was important to enable women, both young and old, to know their rights and to be able to exercise them, especially at a time when Labour Centres were closed due to COVID-19 cases, dispute resolution offices were under lockdown, and there was an extreme backlog of cases. These women were able to advise others, make referrals and, where possible, deal with matters themselves. It lightened the burden of the core team, who were stretched, as they did not have to respond to each and every case.

## Documenting Experiences

One of the leaders of Sisterhood embarked upon a women's support group with community champions to support each other with regular Zoom meetings. In a unique methodology that suited the circumstances of COVID-19, some members of the women's support group agreed to conduct interviews with women in their community or hold a focus group observing social distancing to eventually compile their stories of triumph and hardship during COVID-19. Younger and older women who were part of the women's support group assisted with the interviews. The motto for all of us was that, given the isolating impact of the social distancing regulation on women, this was more than just an interview and had the potential to be the only conversation where someone was really interested to hear what it was like for the interviewees to live through the COVID-19 pandemic. This documentation is currently being edited into a book that will be titled "Web of Life Disrupted".

## Conclusion

The above-mentioned interventions demonstrate the endless innovative opportunities for intergenerational solidarity actions and the importance of bridging the age divide during emergencies and crises. Instead of being simply victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, grassroots women displayed leadership and tenacity. They were at the

forefront of shaping and driving change in their respective communities towards efforts at building resilience. It is these unsung sheroes whose voices and work need to be shared and amplified.

## References

Sato, Mayumi. 2020. "Bridging the Divide: An Intergenerational and Intersectional Response to COVID-19 in the Age of Information." *Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness*. 8 September. Available at https://www.socialconnectedness.org/bridging-the-divide-an-intergenerational-and-intersectional-response-to-covid-19-in-the-age-of-information/

# The Struggle Is Real: Fighting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Pandemic in the Time of COVID-19

**Vicci Tallis and Tracy Jean-Pierre**

> The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified women's multiple vulnerabilities. The economy has reportedly lost about 3 million jobs since the start of the lockdown. Two-thirds of these jobs belonged to women. Women make up the majority of those employed in the informal sector, the sector hardest hit by the pandemic. Informal workers have no job security, do not enjoy the protection of labour legislation, and cannot access credit. For women, this entrenches economic dependency on men – one of the factors that keeps them trapped in abusive relationships. NS, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 2/12/2020

Across the continent, feminist organisations, small informal collectives, and individual feminists drive the response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the absence of adequate state responses providing the support and resources that victims/survivors require. SGBV is endemic in many countries in Africa, reflecting and upholding patriarchy. According to the World Health Organization, 36,6% of women in the Sub-Saharan African region have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV). Feminist organisations have become more and more vocal, taking to the streets (in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, among others) and challenging state responses. In South Africa, for example, the government has responded to sustained activism from women's rights organisations with a strategy that ticks all the boxes on paper (including support, access to justice, and prevention elements) but needs huge resources to be properly implemented. Needless to say, although the money has been earmarked, it has never been fully disbursed.

The COVID-19 pandemic, containment, and mitigation strategies have impacted significantly on SGBVF, and violence has increased exponentially, especially IPV. This has intensified the strain on organisations providing support: for example, the need for extractions increased during lockdown and the logistics became much

more complex, with women who conducted extractions requiring permits, and windows for extractions lessened.

Enza Social Research (ENZA), a feminist NGO based in South Africa and offering tailor-made, online, blended training and research, has a long history of involvement in SGBVF work. Through this work it became apparent that SGBVF activists were under even more strain in delivering services during the pandemic, and so ENZA developed a short online course on COVID-19, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and Self-Care, which was offered free of charge to activists across the continent. The course consisted of three modules (COVID-19 and SGBV; Feminist responses to SGBV in COVID-19 Era – extractions, women with disabilities, resources; Self-Care). Embedded into the course were discussion forums that enabled a sharing of ideas, offloading, and raising issues. One hundred and three women registered from six countries (Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) with the majority from South Africa. The course ran during the 16 Days of Activism 2020, from 25 November to 10 December 2020.

The discussions[1] gave insights into the stress of doing SGBV work during the pandemic – but also highlighted innovative ways that feminist activists and organisations addressed the many challenges that the pandemic presented – including the mitigating strategies imposed by governments, such as hard lockdowns.

## The Stresses

The stress of doing extractions multiplied; some activists were unable to find alternative housing for abused women, and extraction workers/warriors/activists were dealing with their own individual COVID-19 pressures.

> The gender-based violence (GBV) work was affected by COVID-19 in many ways. Women and young girls could not access [our organisations] to report the GBV cases, hence some ended up in graves. We could not network with the legal system so as to deal with the perpetrators, due to the total shutdown. Online platforms were overwhelmed with victims, since the cases of GBV increased during the lockdown period, hence we were unable to attend to all cases. *PM, Zimbabwe, Self-Care Course, 27/11//2020*

1 Quotes in this article are taken from the discussion groups – we have referenced initials, country and date of contribution.

> My GBV work changed during the COVID-19 lockdown; we couldn't access support services as quickly as before, we couldn't reach victims physically, or even if we could reach the victims, some police stations were closed because some police officers were infected. Mainly, our organisation supports, in terms of feeding programme, refugees, abandoned women, widows, and orphaned children, but during the COVID-19 lockdown, we couldn't get any support at all from our donors. It has affected us a lot – seeing women and children dying of hunger. *TP, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 26/11//2020*

COVID-19 forced a different kind and level of organising. Women began to act quickly – within a few weeks of lockdown, activists were promoting services, creating contact sheets, and organising local committees. Over and above the increased demand for services, activists had to deal with a complex set of issues: for example, hunger, and moving people to different areas. There was a need for a holistic response and plan – extraction alone was not sufficient to meet the needs of women.

> More women needed access to assistance. They were vulnerable because they were unemployed or lost their jobs during COVID and some were confined at home with abusers... Our NGO was able to access some funding to assist survivors with food, transport, etc. *MR, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 3/12/2020*

## The Innovative Solutions

Across the continent, women's rights organisations working on SGBV adopted a variety of innovative solutions to deal with the pandemic and the resultant restrictions. Women from Nigeria worked with the state apparatus to intensify responses and circumvent the barriers to service delivery that COVID-19 deepened.

> When the lockdown started, it was difficult for crisis response. Calls were coming in and restricted movement did not help at all. The emergency planning was not gender conscious at all. The police could not arrest or also make home arrest. Survivors were locked in with abusers. It was chaotic, although, with the State Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team, we were able to use the fear of the law in some situations to intervene. *PO, Nigeria, Self-Care Course, 26/11/2020*

Kenyan feminists looked at ways to maintain community activism and also successfully advocated for changes in COVID-19 regulations to ensure that services could continue.

> In Kenya, [the] COVID-19 pandemic posed considerable challenge to organising community meetings, and access to services at the health facility. There was inability to continue with project implementation due to government restrictions on social gatherings, lockdown, and curfew. This resulted in SGBV survivors experiencing difficulties in accessing services due to transport disruptions, lockdown measures, police brutality, and reluctance to go to health facilities. We adapted to the new normal and started conducting virtual meetings, holding small meeting sessions, providing masks while adhering to Ministry of Health guidelines. We advocated for a curfew pass for maternity and SGBV cases to allow continuity of services. We also conducted case management for SGBV. *EM, Kenya, Self-Care Course, 7/12/2020*

Women funded a lot of the work themselves, given that there were limited resources available. The pandemic strained a lot of people financially – activists and first responders did not have the same resources they had before. For example, artists, activists and teachers found themselves out of work, but still continued to do the work as best they could.

> COVID-19 really affected my GBV work. With the lockdown, I could not move up and down for awareness campaign, women and girls could not access sexual and reproductive health services, women and girls experienced more violence in my country because the recent research shows high numbers of rape, early pregnancies, and HIV infection. Poverty plus lockdown too contributed to an increase in GBV since many had no resources to utilise at their homes so they didn't have the courage to report any violence. *RP, Malawi, Self-Care Course, 1/12/2020*

Based on our own experience doing SGBV work, especially during COVID-19, the challenges of providing comprehensive services to meet the diverse and unique needs of women with disabilities proved even more difficult. Women who did the course

also raised the challenges in meeting the complex and special needs of women with disabilities – bringing to the fore gaps in service.

> People with disabilities continue to be marginalised in response to GBV. Apart from stigmatisation they often face, there is a lack of empathy and support for people with disabilities, ranging from dealing with law enforcement, to government, communities, etc. There needs to be inclusiveness in the strategies and workplans with regards to GBV. *FR, South Africa, 9/12/2020*

> People with disabilities, especially women, face violence, but it is hard for them to come out and report, not that they can't do it, but some are just afraid. *RP, Malawi, Self-Care Course 1/12/2020*

One activist from Nigeria highlighted the issue of the lack of representation of women with disabilities:

> As women activists continue to fight for a more responsive contribution in all facets to GBV, we need women with disabilities activists too. We need their voices in decision making and on the drawing board. This will contribute immensely to [understanding] how GBV affects and impacts them. Also, more disability-friendly response and shelters are needed. *DA, Nigeria, Self-Care Course, 27/11/2020*

Even in a context where some services are available, such as South Africa, the issue of accessibility for women with disability remains an issue. As an activist from South Africa noted, "This is a big challenge, since most shelters do not have facilities that cater for people with disabilities. There is need for shelters to be made in such a way that they can accommodate people with disabilities." *CE, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 2/12/2020*

It was important to have an inherently feminist analysis of needs of both the persons providing support and the persons needing help. The module on self-care, which stemmed from the need to support first responders, emphasised the importance of self-care as essential and provided tips on how to develop a contextual and culturally appropriate self-care plan.

> Self-care is more than just putting the plaster on the trauma sore. It is about creating a stable mind, body, and soul to respond to the challenges without attaching ourselves to the cases we deal with. Self-care is also about celebrating your services and what you offer. When we affirm ourselves, we care for ourselves. *SN, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 25/11/2020*

Focusing on the self is critical, given that the notion of women taking care of themselves is more often than not strongly influenced by patriarchal norms and prescriptions. This is so even with feminists who understand the rhetoric, but who also find it difficult to take care of their own needs – as evident in the voices of two different South African activists:

> I sometimes find it difficult to do a self-care plan, because of fear of self-exposure and change. Once I thought deeply about the bigger picture of myself and what is happening in the world, I have realised that a self-care plan is a benefit for other people too. *NS, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 27/11/2020*

> I find it very difficult to do a self-care plan. Debriefing is something I need to do regularly, but don't prioritise things to care for myself SADLY! I commit to working on this because I know it is important and will make me feel a lot better. *PM, South Africa, Self-Care Course, 4/12/2020*

Some organisations shared useful internal strategies to position self-care as a critical part of organisational function.

> Self-care has to be a deliberate and intentional part of the work, just like Audre Lorde mentioned. To my organisation and I, it is not a luxury but a lifeline. We owe ourselves to take care of us. The world is going no-where and the problem is there. "It is only the living that can make any contribution to help and support others." This is our mantra. When I perceive my staff and see they are getting worn out, I shut down services and it's a "no work" day. Straight to the beach, cinema or where the

> weather and mood permits us to play. No work. We resume next day rejuvenated. Same as group therapy, as well as making sure opportunities are taken for fellowships, conferences... travel away from work and taking their leave. Self-care is part of our work culture. It's not joked with. *PO, Nigeria, Self-Care Course, 27/11/2020*

## Conclusion

Despite multiple personal challenges faced by feminists across the region, it is clear that SGBV activists continued to fight violence and provide as much support to victims/survivors as possible. This is not without consequences for women – and with no end in sight to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that support is provided to frontline responders to enable them to continue the work in a way that is not detrimental to their own health and wellbeing.

# The Response of the Women's Fund Tanzania Trust During COVID-19

**Shamillah Wilson**

## Introduction

In the 21st century, the African continent faces complex questions of social, economic, and political resilience. In the more than 25 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, there have been numerous advances in gender equality within national and international institutions, legal frameworks and policy mandates, as well as in approaches aimed at securing sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTI rights and political and economic rights, among other areas. While many African countries made progress in terms of instituting progressive laws and policies to address gender inequalities, implementation of laws remains a challenge and, as a result, women continue to face discrimination in matters of personal law such as marriage, inheritance, citizenship/nationality and access to property and land (African Union Commission, 2018).

Added to this, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls across the region. The pandemic has exacerbated the burdens of unpaid care work, increasing risks of gender-based violence, impacting livelihoods of women disproportionately - especially in the informal sector, and reducing access to sexual and reproductive health care (Mahuku, 2020).

However, the narrative on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of African women cannot be limited to their vulnerability. There is also a need to pay attention to their leadership and their ability to survive, mobilise and organise during times of crisis. COVID-19 has highlighted, once again, that during epidemics, governments make difficult decisions generally – responding to COVID-19 as a health crisis and often not taking into account people's social and economic needs. As a result, grassroots movements—usually feminist and women-led ones—have stepped up in response to the pandemic, providing frontline services and support to the marginalised, advocating for gender-responsive policy agendas and demanding government accountability for human rights.

## Covid-19 in Tanzania

Tanzania's first coronavirus case was reported on 16 March 2020. Following this, the government announced several measures to curb the spread of the virus, such as closing down all schools and colleges and suspending all sports events and gatherings. The government also embarked on an awareness campaign that focused on preventive measures such as handwashing, the use of sanitisers, and mask wearing. The number of passengers in public transport was cut as commuter buses were only allowed to carry seated passengers. No lockdown was instituted, but for a while it seemed the country was complying with basic prevention measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Shangwe, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic was treated as a national health emergency and disaster due to its impact on the economy and implications for the public health system. In the spirit of national solidarity, businesses, corporates and individuals were called on to support the government's efforts to combat the virus. This was based on the understanding that including the private sector in disaster management reduces risks and duplication of efforts, especially in an environment where coordination is weak. Government also partnered with civil society organisations in channelling donations of medical supplies and technological gadgets in the efforts to combat Covid-19.

Unlike other countries that instituted stringent measures to minimise the short-, medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic, though, the Tanzanian government revoked the initial restrictions, and formulated guidelines for mandatory quarantine, mandatory testing, health service provision, and management of social services provision and social activities. These guidelines were not strictly enforced and were a way to "perform" compliance to international standards for tourists coming into the country, and for truck drivers and others needing to cross regional borders.

Despite the virus having reached the country, hospitals filling up, and increased burials, efforts were only directed to education sectors and a few other areas, especially those involving mass gatherings, but excluding marketplaces. This lax stance made people reluctant to observe social distancing, wear masks, or maintain sanitary habits. President Magufuli's outright denial of the severity of the health crisis impacted on the country's prevention efforts and allowed the virus to spread unabated. Prior to his death, the government maintained that it would not accept the coronavirus vaccine until there was sufficient proof of its efficacy. Instead, it would concentrate on the promotion of natural remedies to treat "infectious diseases".

The above political context meant that the mere mentioning of COVID-19 became taboo, with government and media reports adopting the use of the terms "respiratory challenge" or, simply, "pneumonia" instead. Face masks became a political statement, with President Magufuli at times praising those who did not wear them. During one meeting, a mayor of Moshi municipality even ordered mask-wearing councillors to take them off or leave. It is within this context that the role of civil society groups became critical to prioritise the lived realities of people during a pandemic, given the denialism by government.

As expected, support for already strained, over-stretched, and under-resourced grassroots and women's rights organisations is key during such a pandemic. Hence, the role of women's funds becomes critical in providing to activists, groups, organisations, and movements. As the COVID-19 crisis impacts countries' economies and funders' finances severely, women's funds have been positioned to move quickly, adapting to a rapidly changing context. Women's funds have experience in responding to crises (e.g., earthquakes) by providing immediate relief and long-term support for women's and communities' recovery, self-reliance, and reactivation of their economies. Not only is their contribution an important part of the continent's crisis response, but it is necessary to sustain the protection of the rights of women, girls, and other marginalised groups within society.

This article focuses on the work of the Women's Fund Tanzania, looking, in particular, at the strategies during this time, as well as discussing the broader significance of this work in supporting women's rights agendas during and post COVID-19.

## The Women's Fund Tanzania Trust

The Women's Fund Tanzania Trust (WFT-T) (the "Fund") is the only national feminist fund in Tanzania and in East Africa. The dream behind the drive to create a women's-only funding modality in Tanzania started as early as 2003, as the founders realised that women's voices, visibility, and contributions to achieve empowerment and social justice would remain unseen and undervalued unless adequate funding reached them. Officially, WFT-T was established in 2006. At this time, globally, there was increasing awareness that resources for women's rights agendas had already been shrinking, and studies conducted by the women's movement in Tanzania highlighted the challenges of the funding landscape for women's movements (Rematullah and Chigudu, 2017).

WFT-T started with modest resources but has progressively built on its successes and positioned itself as a relevant and responsive institution supporting constituency and alliance building, agenda setting, and organising for social justice. In 2011, the Fund had its first operational year starting with a pilot grant making programme combined with a strong mentorship programme.

Even prior to COVID-19, WFT-T wanted their grant making to: (i) lead to increased capacities and potential of women's movement(s), women's organisations, women's groups, and individual women, especially at the local level, to contribute to change; (ii) contribute to enhanced capacity and better-equipped stakeholders in order to protect and promote women's rights and (iii) support collective action of a widened circle of actors (Women's Fund Tanzania, 2016).

WFT-T work is aimed at addressing the root causes of gender inequality through a combination of fundraising, grant making, resource mobilisation, and capacity building. The Fund works closely with the women's movement in Tanzania to ensure that the limited resources of WFT-T are used tactically and strategically. In particular, WFT-T has, from the outset, prioritised smaller grassroots movements or communities that may struggle to access mainstream funding due to a lack of resources or capacities. For many groups, the funding from WFT-T has been the only financial resource they have been able to access.

As such, since establishment, WFT-T has gone a long way to support community-based women's rights initiatives working on promoting issues of sex-workers' rights, women's disability rights, adolescent girls and sexuality rights, adolescent girls and leadership skills, young women's rights and decent employment, and women's political rights. Furthermore, WFT-T has catalysed and given birth to cross-sectoral alliances/coalitions within and outside of the women's movements and cutting-edge agendas driven from the bottom up and fuelled by the deep political visions of various constituents of women's movements. These alliances not only bridge geographies and issue silos, but they also cross the otherwise deep divides of class, rural-urban, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, and age.

## WFT-T's Response During the Pandemic

WFT-T's ability to respond timeously and flexibly has played a role in enabling local women's rights organisations to pivot to meet unexpected challenges during the pandemic response and recovery. Not only have women's rights organisations had

to adapt to the new realities presented by the pandemic, but they have also had to amplify their advocacy for more caring and just societies.

Soon after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Arusha in February 2020, more cases were reported. WFT-T management and its Board came together to devise strategies that would simultaneously ensure that the staff remained safe and the Fund's agenda was protected – i.e., it would have a concrete way of responding during a pandemic such that the mandate of promoting women's rights, while fostering an enabling environment for the growth of a gender-sensitive society through grant making and capacity strengthening, was not eroded. This meant that the Fund's response to the pandemic was inherently related to its mission focused on the protection of the rights of women, young girls, and children.

Using WFT-T's positioning, one of the most immediate actions of the Fund was to mobilise resources to ensure that there were additional resources to respond to the emergent realities of women, girls, children, and the marginalised, as well as the sustainability of the broader women's rights agenda. WFT-T successfully managed to secure new funds and confirm fund reallocation to support with both practical needs for life survival as well as fund programmes that addressed the emerging impacts of COVID-19, like GBV. From this experience, WFT-T learnt that while all the Fund's funding partners were supportive and flexible, for some, their internal systems were not oriented to be flexible enough to enable its responsive grant making processes to function as the situation on the ground demanded.

Notwithstanding these challenges, WFT-T was able to send out a call for proposals through various outlets including the Fund's website and several media outlets. In order to effectively respond to the many proposals for funding during the pandemic, WFT-T, with board approval, launched a new grantmaking window known as the fast responsive window. This called for the re-organisation of the internal staff grant making review teams and the external review team (comprised of diverse representation of members of civil society and women's movements). This enabled WFT-T to shorten the grant approval time from three months to one month.

In total, during 2020, WFT-T received 641 applications (as part of the COVID-19 Special Call) across the country and 42 were approved and funded. The amount disbursed across funded thematic areas totalled TZS600,000 million (US$238,432) (Women's Fund Tanzania, 2021).

Through funding support during the pandemic, WFT-T was able to support movement building and awareness raising of COVID-19 across the whole society

and promote intersectionality of agendas in addressing COVID-19's effects on the rights of women, young girls, and children. Furthermore, support from the Fund enhanced the capability of duty bearers in responding to and supporting victims of violence within the COVID-19 context.

## The Significance of WFT-T's Work During the Pandemic (and Beyond)

*A responsive and empowering funding mechanism that supports diverse strategies*

WFT-T's intention is to provide a funding mechanism that is empowering. For the Fund, it means that resourcing is done in a manner that goes beyond financial support to include capacity building, bridge-building and, ultimately, the brokering of relationships between diverse actors so that they limit working in silos. More than half of WFT grants are accompanied by capacity building, including ways of organising or strengthening women's leadership and confidence as citizens and political actors (Wilson, 2021).

The resulting impact of this approach to resourcing has meant that a range of actors that may not have had the opportunities or possibilities (such as grassroots groups, rural-based groups, young women's initiatives, sex worker led groups, and trans groups) were strengthened in their activism and leadership such that they were able to connect their own struggles to other struggles and strengthened their organising power. A review of the Fund's funding strategies prior to COVID-19 shows it investing in diverse organising strategies. Despite there being a multitude of strategies and interventions by grantee partners, what the strategies have in common when woven together in a combined narrative is that there are many ways in which groups may view and understand their realities, as well as how they choose to address them. The other common feature is that, when put together, these different strategies are a demonstration of the multiple forms of agency that are being activated through WFT grantmaking in transforming patriarchal norms and structures.

During COVID-19, the Fund was able to concretely demonstrate how to be responsive in its grantmaking work. The Fund's usual processes of connecting to priorities of different actors in the national context included consultation and engagement with different actors and stakeholders, as well as an annual scoping

exercise (building on grant analysis). These processes enabled the Fund to have a nuanced understanding of the different issues and strategies that require resourcing with the ultimate objective of advancing the agenda for gender quality and social justice within the local context (Wilson, 2021). During COVID-19, the Fund paid even more attention to consultation and engagement with a wide range of movement actors to understand which areas needed more support and attention during the crisis. As a result, the Fund was able to invest in the following strategies:

- *Movement Building*. Support to organisations with strategic interventions designed to promote movement building agendas within the COVID 19 context. For example, supporting convenings to develop strategies responding to women's rights abuses during the pandemic.
- *Children's rights*. Support of remote education for children, including virtual learning and supply of home-based learning material as well as responding to the National Plan of Action on Ending Violence against Women and Children.
- S*exual reproductive health rights (SRHR)*. Support to scale up awareness on SRHR issues to adolescent girls and emergency responses to SRHR needs.
- *GBV and Sextortion*. Support for strategic initiatives seeking to combat GBV, particularly sexual corruption; for example, running helplines for victims of domestic violence during the crisis; establishment of a dedicated helpline, designed to respond to cases of GBV; and targeting domestic workers as a marginalised group. Also, dedicated support was allocated to sex workers during the crisis.
- *Media*. Focused support on enhancing visibility and creating debates around women's rights issues. The interventions were designed to play a critical role in investigating and reporting violations on women, girls, children, and other marginalised groups throughout the crisis.

WFT-T's ability to respond rapidly and timeously to the pandemic as the effects were emerging is demonstrative of a grant making model that is responsive and flexible. The Fund was able to build on existing strategic priorities, as well as to remain agile in response to the unplanned and unexpected crisis of COVID-19. This responsive, relevant, and empowering aspect of grant making has been affirmed by grantees as well as partners in previous research conducted on the Fund's work.

*Supporting multiple levels of organising*

WFT-T has a strong commitment to building diverse alliances across Tanzanian society such that the emerging agenda for women's rights takes into account the diverse realities of women and girls based on intersections of power related to economic status, location, religion, sexuality, ability, and other factors. This is expressed in the following foundational principle of WFT-T:

"women, across all levels of society, have the potential to effect change in their own lives and that of their communities."

In many ways, this forms the basis for the ways in which WFT-T nurtures and supports strategic action by women to transform their own realities, particularly at the local level, to increase their voice, visibility, and impact. Emanating from an analysis of the different forms of power, access and capacity of different groups, the Fund prioritises support in the form of financial resources, as well as capacity strengthening and mentoring processes for "'underserved and marginalised,", as well as rural and remote women's groups and organisations.

It is within this framework that WFT-T has been able to divert increased resources for this category of actors. An important part of this strategic focus for WFT-T has been a commitment to learning about the different ways groups (particularly at the grassroots level) are using those resources to realise rights, and to understand what additional forms of support they need to support their increased voice and visibility. This is an important contribution of WFT-T in building the narrative of how diverse forms of feminist organising are evolving, and identifying current challenges in building and sustaining vibrancy of movements.

Prior to COVID-19, more than a third of WFT-T's funding went to support community-based initiatives as a demonstration of this commitment (Wilson, 2021). During COVID-19, funding through the Special Call was aggregated as follows: 88% of funding went to support grants at national level, while 12% went to support community-based initiatives. Given the urgency to respond, and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic, it was decided that a larger portion of funding would go to support national organisations. The decision was based on the recognition that organisations at the national level were positioned to respond quickly and

had the necessary institutionalised financial systems to strategically advance the Fund's agenda. Nevertheless, this contribution remains significant, given that it is in addition to other funding allocated to this grouping during a time when the need for resourcing was extremely urgent.

The approach of supporting organising and feminist responses at multiple levels is part of WFT-T's strategy to expand the number of actors that have enhanced conceptual and ideological clarity (on feminist and rights agendas and approaches). In COVID-19, while remaining true to the original intents and approaches, WFT-T had to respond quickly, cognisant of risks, while channelling resources to actors that were positioned to address issues as they emerged during the COVID-19 crisis.

*Supporting and facilitating movement building*

WFT-T also has a strong emphasis on movement building in their grant making and programmatic work. This is based on the Fund's recognition that resourcing is just one critical precondition to the success and sustainability of women's movements in the country. In supporting this commitment, WFT-T actively fosters and supports linkages and alliances by playing an active role in convening and resourcing strategic alliances. In particular, WFT-T, through strategic coalitions, brings together actors across all levels of the society, to ensure greater voice and visibility are given to potentially marginal voices.

At the same time, for the groups that WFT-T supports in terms of capacity strengthening, encouraging their participation in different coalitions is a way to advance the underlying belief that it is important to support and strengthen smaller, less visible actors and organisations to engage and join the actions of other actors at the national level.

In the Fund's COVID-19 work, support was provided for initiatives that responded to the immediate effects of the pandemic. For example, support was provided to reduce mental-health-related suicidal cases through the establishment of an online counselling structure (tele-counselling). Online platforms resulted in more than 4,500 calls from various community members, men as well as women. Another type of support provided included funding for the protection of communities that might face double marginalisation, such as sex workers, domestic workers, persons with disability, the elderly, and children. Support was provided to respond

to violence as well as to supply protective gears. WFT-T also supported efforts to assist remote communities to access justice structures in reporting GBV targeting women, young girls, and children during the lockdown.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, WFT-T had strategically funded selected organisations at national level, with the aim of supporting the formation of platforms that would bring together various sections and types of women formations. These platforms, such as the Constitutional Coalition and the Sextortion Coalition, have played an important role in providing opportunities and space for women's rights actors to come together, dialogue, network, and share experiences and lessons on the progress made in addressing women's rights violations in their various manifestations in the Tanzanian context. During COVID-19, the Fund continued to convene with different women's rights actors online, given that public gathering and community mobilising was limited. This was to ensure that, as different communities were grappling with the realities of a pandemic, leaders from within women's movements could come together to share experiences and ideas and strategise collectively in relation to the pandemic and even beyond.

These types of engagements informed the Fund's broader COVID-19 movement-building response that ultimately led to existing (and new) grantee partners being required to amend their interventions to accommodate COVID-19-related strategies. In addition, different actors were requested to think through and propose possibilities for movement building as part of their proposals. Even prior to COVID-19, the Fund played an active role in encouraging other actors to include marginalised groups and actors: those that were often operating under the radar; often small, unregistered groups and collectives whose voice might be drowned out in mainstream civil society spaces. On the part of the Fund, there was a desire to learn how different groups were addressing the effects of COVID-19, and what the insights were in relation to building and strengthening organising on the rights of women, young girls, and children. Thus, as part of WFT-T's response during COVID-19, the emphasis was not only on supporting immediate needs, but also on more strategic concerns for women's movements. As such, WFT-T provided support for executive directors and senior staff from women's rights organisations and groups to reflect, share experience and provide support on how to sustain their women's rights agendas during the crisis. In this way, WFT-T ensured that it kept in focus not only immediate concerns, but also the longer-term concerns of organising and mobilising for gender equality. Other examples of movement-building support

included dialogues at different levels with different groups such as adolescents and community-based activists.

The results of such movement-building work enhanced the capability of marginalised communities in advocating for their rights within the COVID-19 context. This is also significant, given the often-limited visibility and voice of marginalised communities and actors in addressing inequalities and injustices. One example cited by WFT-T is the empowerment of a group of women with disabilities to voice their experiences, and the particular forms of abuse and other human rights abuses experienced during COVID-19. At a movement level, this is critical for inclusion in a broader women's rights agenda nationally.

Furthermore, the Fund also linked local women's movements to regional and global networks and made provision to capture and document women's struggles through feminist writing that aimed to tell emergent and existing stories as well as capacitate a new generation of feminist writers.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that an account of women's realities during the COVID-19 pandemic would be incomplete without highlighting the resilience and responsiveness of women's rights actors during a trying time. However, at the same time, while there has been increased recognition of the central role played by national and local organisations in humanitarian action during the COVID-19 crisis, the reality is that their efforts often lack both political and financial support. There do seem to be shifts in awareness among the donor community, with the recognition that resourcing for women's rights agendas is not being equitably distributed, with larger amounts of funding going to bigger international NGOs. Yet, the most flexible money tailored to the priorities and needs of locally-led feminist movements sit in the smallest pools – i.e., resources from women's funds, a small number of private foundations, and autonomous resources that feminist movements generate themselves.

On the one hand, this article provides an account of the work of WFT-T during COVID-19 and speaks to resourcing the responsiveness of a range of actors at a time when governments have failed to plan for and respond to the social and economic vulnerabilities of diverse communities. On the other hand, the extent of support that WFT-T was able to provide was limited to the resources that were available to the Fund.

WFT-T also demonstrated the importance of responding to the crisis of the pandemic in a context of political denialism. For WFT-T, this was possible due to movement-building work done by the Fund, prior to the pandemic, which allowed it to listen to and assess from diverse constituencies of women's rights actors what their lived realities were. WFT-T had already established the mechanisms for engaging smaller, larger, urban, as well as rural-based women's rights actors in previous processes, and was able to utilise this to understand how best to respond to immediate needs, while not losing ground on the broader agenda of sustaining women's rights. In turn, WFT-T worked in close collaboration with donors to negotiate grantmaking agreements that were responsive to emergent needs, particularly during a crisis. As noted by the Fund, not all donors were responsive to such negotiations at the outset, but due to the relationship that WFT-T had with them, the ongoing conversations meant that the Fund achieved some successes in this regard.

WFT-T also worked closely with a range of actors within civil society to share relevant information related to the pandemic with partners, and also to connect those actors and partners to existing responses to COVID-19. This was particularly important given the high levels of violence stemming from the impact of physical isolation and victimisation. Once again, the existing relationships that the Fund had with a broad range of civil society partners assisted it in making timeous responses in a context of "non-responsiveness" by government. In reflection, WFT-T noted that what was most important during this period was to be willing to adjust strategies to make them more responsive to the moment. Navigating different types of relationships and alliances was critical, and not without its challenges. However, at the end of the day, the priority given to seeking out allies that were willing to go against government positions assisted WFT-T (and its allies) to respond to the emergent (and urgent) needs expressed by different communities during the crisis. WFT-T's commitment to an intersectional agenda enabled it to remain true to the need to support different movements and actors across several sectors to address challenges facing women, girls, and other marginalised communities collectively.

While WFT-T has always remained committed to breaking down silos in its grantmaking approach by resourcing organisations working to address the multiple challenges faced by women, girls, and gender-diverse populations, the Fund also acknowledged that, due to the urgency of responding quickly to needs expressed by groups, in reality, groups that were less established, or that did not have the

infrastructure to implement quickly, were less likely to receive funding during COVID-19. Outside of the pandemic, the Fund would accompany such groups and support them to be in a position to receive funding and implement their strategies. Due to the urgency of required responses and limited resources, the Fund thus had to prioritise those groups that were in a position to reach groups that were at greater risk and be able to successfully implement their activities. As such, COVID-19 has highlighted the need for the Fund to continue building the capacities of smaller, informal groups or initiatives so that those groups would also be able to directly receive funding support in future. Due to this challenge, the Fund has indicated that the coverage of funding for COVID-19 is not likely to have achieved the outcomes of supporting the most diverse range of agendas and strategies that might be possible in the national context.

WFT-T's work during COVID-19 pandemic is an important story to tell about the role of a national fund during a global crisis. In the context of current funding of women's rights agendas, the grantmaking budgets of national women's funds are comparatively small (OECD, 2016). Notwithstanding their budget size, as demonstrated by WFT-T, they are able to reach and support different actors to respond to and effect change at multiple levels within the Tanzanian context.

For WFT-T, COVID-19 provides a compelling case for funders to localise responses by prioritising the expertise of women, girls, communities, and local organisations. As noted by WFT-T, a lesson learnt from their COVID-19 experience is that women's funds have to continue doing work to collectively influence donors to "decolonise" their funding approaches for greater results at the local levels, especially during pandemic contexts. In other words, women's funds must continue making the case for bi- and multi-lateral donors to support and resource them as a mechanism to shift resources and decision-making to actors rooted in a national context, thus ensuring that responses are local and contextualised.

## References

African Union Commission. 2018. *Women's Rights in Africa. Challenges, Opportunities and Proposals for Accelerated Implementation*. Addis Ababa: African Union Commission/ UN Women. Available at / https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Africa/Attachments/Publications/2018/12/Womens%20rights%20in%20Africacompressed%201.pdf

Mahuku, Everjoy et al. 2020. *CARE Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID 19: East, Central and Southern Africa*. Geneva: CARE International. Available at https://covid19.alnap.org/help-library/covid-19-rapid-gender-analysis-for-east-central-southern-africa-care

OECD. 2016. *Donor support to southern women's rights organisations*. Available: https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/OECD-report-on-womens-rights-organisations.pdf

Rehmatullah, Shamshad and Chigudu, Hope. 2017. *Situation Analysis of Women's Movement in Tanzania*. Unpublished Research Report.

Shangwe, Muhidin. 2021. "*Tanzania's Covid-19 Strategy: Local and Regional Implications*." ACCORD, 5 May. Available at https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/tanzanias-covid-19-strategy-local-and-regional-implications/

Wilson, Shamillah. 2021. *Women's Funds: Building, Sustaining, and Supporting Women's Movements. The Study of the Women's Fund Tanzania*. A Study Commissioned by the PROSPERA Network of Women's Funds. Unpublished Report.

Women's Fund Tanzania. 2016. *Strategic Plan 2016-2020*. Available at: https://wft.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Women-Fund-Tanzania-Strategic-Plan-2016-2020.pdf

Women's Fund Tanzania. 2021. *WFT-T COVID-19 Analysis Report, 2020*. Unpublished report.

# A Magnifying Glass and A Fine-Tooth Comb: Understanding Girls' and Young Women's Sexual Vulnerability, by Mzikazi Nduna. Pretoria: CSA&G Press, Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender, University of Pretoria, 2020.

**Peace Kiguwa and Thobeka Nkomo**

We come together in our shared interest and work in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to review a body of work that promises to cast a critical eye on an old terrain of work and knowledge. Mzikazi Nduna's *A Magnifying Glass and A Fine-Tooth Comb: Understanding Girls' and Young Women's Sexual Vulnerability* is a welcome review of this terrain in SRHR as it pertains to young girls. In this review, we explore her recent monograph on adolescent sexuality intervention models within a Southern African context.

Ten countries make up the southernmost region of sub-Saharan Africa: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Across Southern Africa, a person under 18 years is regarded as a minor and generally assumed to be in school. Nonetheless, there are differences within and between these countries in terms of what a "child" is permitted or not permitted to do. For example, in Namibia, childhood protection laws include protection of under-14-year-olds against child labour (Welge, 2020). Investigation also notes that matters of adolescent sexual and reproductive health remain neglected in the country and are difficult to consistently attend to, given the differing views on developmental stages of the child and adolescent (Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2021). Similarly, it has been noted that many of the policies aimed at adolescent SRHR in Botswana are outdated and rely on assumptions of adolescence that do not address the realities and needs of its young population (UNFPA, 2017–2021). In Zimbabwe, reports indicate that conceptual clarity is required if some adolescents are to not be excluded from the framing of SRHR policies and protection (Remez *et al.*, 2014).

Across Southern Africa, the shared adage that it takes a village to raise a child – alluding to the important and influential role played by the community,

including institutions such as the family, schools, churches, traditional courts, and the media – is a useful starting place to examine how adolescent sexuality and rights are considered. In her book, Nduna introduces the reader to normative sexual association in the context of the Southern African collectivist culture. Nduna suggests that girls and young women need to work twice as hard to be at the same level as boys or young men. Spanning five chapters, this book reflects on some underlying assumptions behind SRHR interventions aimed at girls and young women for preventing early pregnancy and reducing the risk of HIV infection by encouraging "sequencing". The author begins the conversation by locating modern-day challenges regarding sexual and reproductive health prevention interventions for adolescent girls and young women within the historical context of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. The background includes a discussion regarding government and vulnerability today.

In locating any discussion of SRHR within the historical-political context of gender and sexuality (including their intersections with race and class), Nduna sets an agenda that is unapologetic about shifting the taken-for-granted notions that underlie many interventions in adolescent sexual and reproductive matters. This agenda is an important one that properly locates the politics of gender and sexuality, highlighting the continued ramifications of a history of racial, gendered, and class oppression in South Africa and the continent more broadly. Adolescent sexuality, particularly as it portends to young black girls, cannot be read outside of these historical-political, cultural, economic, and racial contexts.

The introduction chapter lays the essential groundwork for the next chapters. It presents some of the dominant ontological assumptions underpinning favoured approaches to engaging with adolescent sexuality: the *sequential* and *combination* models of intervention. These ontological assumptions include: 1) *development as acontextual and* 2) *development as apolitical*. These assumptions have been at the core of much feminist theorising and activism in sexuality, reminding us of the significance of historical, political, and economic influences in how sexuality and gender are configured in the state and in everyday lived realities. Nduna's work joins this debate in its firm situating of adolescent sexuality and policies focused thereon within a broader politics of colonialism, Apartheid, and continued formations of inequality. In so doing, she speaks back to gaps in the literature that continue to engage adolescents as a category for intervention who lack agency, as well as to intervention models that reproduce dynamics of gendered power in their undermining of the politics of gender and sexuality and how these impact young

girls and women. Her ontological positioning is unapologetically critical feminist, adopting a stance toward sexual reproductive health and rights work with the view that "individual agency is located and exercised within structural constraints borne of social, historical, cultural, economic and political contexts" (Nduna, 2020: 5).

The second chapter engages in more depth the sequential and combination models of intervention. The sequential model, for example, adopts an ontological assumption that presents adolescent sexual development as linear. Such an assumption rests on understandings of developmental trajectory that include abstinence from sexual intercourse in order to meet a set of linear and predetermined developmental targets, such as education, employment, marriage, and family. Whether for pragmatic reasons, or because it is rooted in traditional value systems, such a model downplays a myriad set of economic, political, social, and cultural factors that inadvertently reinforce and reproduce gender inequalities for many women and girls. Perhaps not always known by this name, the sequential model remains one of the more popular approaches to youth sexuality in many state and institutional responses and even among lay understandings. The combination model, relying on a more nuanced set of assumptions, incorporates the drive to attain and achieve set developmental goals while still exploring or even engaging in transactional sexual intercourse as a means to an end.

Nduna walks us through these different approaches and dissects their utility and complicity in reproducing configurations of gendered power in society and in relation to young girls and women. The author discusses the conditions in which adolescent girls and young women choose to sequence various goals in their lives in terms of five assumptions. One conclusion emerging clearly in this book is that sexual violence undermines the sequential model. Personal agency is important in terms of enabling adolescent girls and young women to make choices, but women in societies with a high prevalence of gender-based violence are unable to exercise such agency. Exposure to sexual violence is an adverse experience with long-lasting and damaging impact. Furthermore, the conversation in this book points out the need to strengthen the education system in our country to make it more viable, feasible, more practical and sustainable for girls and young women. We resonate with the following quote:

> "*Kazi uphi loMiss owathi abafana abapheli sobathola abaryt, masiqede iskole ngfuna azongikhombisa wayesho baphi*" (page 72, figure 2),

> translated as "*Where is the miss who said boys are many, we will find the right ones, that we should focus on school...I want her to come show me where they are now?*"

This is a traditional sequential assumption that states that adolescent girls are expected to arrange their expectations, consumption desires, and longings in a particular sequence. The expectation of a disciplined girl engaged in self-preservation is that she will maintain a certain discipline while in school and wait until she is gainfully employed before enjoying the life of a modern woman.

Chapter 3 goes on to critically interrogate the meanings of sexual vulnerability of young women, again challenging apolitical notions and approaches to vulnerability that do not attend to nuances of intersectionality that include race, class, and sexual orientation. In the words of Nduna, "...institutions do not act in isolation: they are also the products of history" (p. 47). The continued presence of history in the present is a political practice that must be considered in how we reproduce ontological assumptions and interventions that approach gender and sexuality as void of racial, class, and geographical inequalities. The chapter discusses these influences of vulnerability in tandem with the socialisation practices that many young girls and women experience as part of growing up. Chapter 4 fleshes out in more depth the different levels of assumptions that are entrenched in the sequential and combination models, engaging each one critically and interrogating its contributions and shortcomings. This is especially useful as a benchmark for development practitioners, policy influencers, education practitioners, and anyone interested in revisiting development models as they pertain to adolescents and adolescent sexuality especially.

The overall style of the book is refreshing in its accessibility. Deviating from a traditional objectivist approach that disembodies the researcher, Nduna speaks to her readers with a sense of personal situatedness. From the way she infuses moments of the dialogue with her personal accounts and experiences as a young woman, to her astute observations as an activist and a health and gender scholar, the reader is treated to a different mode of engagement that highlights truly that the "personal is political". In dominant knowledge production contexts where facts

and figures and abstract theorising obscure and alienate more than engage, we can almost imagine what it means for a young girl child to read such a work: the voice and lessons of a researcher sharing lived experiences that include a mother anxious about her daughter's risk of teenage pregnancy. In an increasing knowledge production context that speaks on behalf of young women or that alienates how they may engage with experts about their sexual lives, here is a contribution that simultaneously addresses the seasoned experts in the field and the young girl child.

In conclusion, we found this to be an engaging contribution to the terrain of work in SRHR and in relation to adolescent sexuality. Nduna does indeed take a magnifying glass to tried and tested models of intervention, common-sense assumptions of gender and sexuality, and the traditional values that underlie how we think about and work with young girls and young women. The contextual focus of the book spans the schooling context, public health sphere, and ~~the~~ policy and state responses. Part of the book's strength is that it does not only tackle intervention models exclusively but also addresses the issue of how we conceptualise and frame adolescent sexuality as a social problem to begin with. The book suggests that socially constructed shame regarding rape, teenage pregnancy, and HIV infection needs to be addressed to ensure effective responses. If interventions designed for young women operate under conditions of continuing social stigmas regarding these issues, their efficacy will be limited. Read this book if you work in gender and sexuality, are interested in the psycho-sexual well-being of young girls and women, or care about the implications of continued racial, gendered, and class marginalisation in society and as they affect this population group.

## References

Ministry of Health and Social Services. 2021. *Namibia National Policy for Reproductive Health*. http://www.africanchildforum.org/clr/policy%20per%20country/namibia/namibia_reproductive_2002_en.pdf

Remez, Lisa et al. 2014. "Sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents in Zimbabwe." *In Brief*: 3. New York: Guttmacher Institute. Available at https://www.guttmacher.org/report/sexual-and-reproductive-health-needs-adolescents-zimbabwe

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). 2017-2021. Government of Botswana/ UNFPA 6th Country Programme 2017 – 2021. Available at https://botswana.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Botswana%20CPD.pdf

Welge, Giulia. 2020. "Realizing Children's Rights in Namibia." *Humanium*. 31 August. Available at https://www.humanium.org/en/namibia/

# When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya, by Heather D. Switzer. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

**Monique Kwachou**

As per the old English adage, "Do not look a gift horse in the mouth,", we have been made to believe that questioning the value of something "intended for good" is wrong. Yet, a plethora of critiques of development theories and initiatives in the Global South suggest that, if not properly vetted, the most ideal proposal to improve the human condition can fail to meet its intended good – or worse, can foment other ills. Education – specifically girls' education – is one of those "gifts" we rarely question. In recent decades, its value has been established by academic scholarship, confirmed by development reports, and popularised by international campaigns. In response to this widespread ideology of girls' education as a panacea for development in the Global South, Heather Switzer, in her book *When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya*, encourages us to look this gift horse in the mouth. Not so that we should reject it – she makes it clear that she does not dispute the "life-expanding benefits of education" (Switzer, 2018: 25) – but that we can take proper stock of what we are gifted.

Switzer's book draws from her empirical research with over 100 Kenyan Maasai schoolgirls. In it, she presents a robust interrogation of two main assumptions and then proposes the consideration of the embodiment of schooling in the social identity of Maasai girls. The first main assumption Switzer takes on is the pervasive rhetoric that investing in girls' education on the grounds of their potential development output is wholly empowering – as captured by what she terms the "Girls' Effect Logic". Next, she queries the local assumptions that Maasai people have a "hatred" for education and accompanying myopic ideas that this hatred accounts for the Maasai community's contemporary marginalisation. She makes a notable contribution in arguing for Maasai schoolgirlhood as a unique identity in need of recognition in the Maasai social strata and her argument is supported by the Kenyan adage from whence she draws the book's title: "Education is a light". As that "light is really a fire" which is burning a new path, that path must be recognised so that this group

of people who are negotiating who they are now from who they once were and who they aspire to be (based on both individual and communal ideas) can also have a place that connects to the "main road" of their community.

The book consists of six chapters, though the introduction and conclusion are not numbered within. The structure of the book and delineation of chapters encapsulate the aims of widening myopic perceptions of the Maasai regarding education and development, establishing the "Girls Effect Logic" as a very pervasive notion, and interrogating the upshot of schooling on Maasai girls. Despite the aims of each chapter being outlined, there is overlap and thus repetition in some chapters. Switzer writes the book as a first-person narrative, but effectively entwines third-person narrations of her participants' stories as well. In addition, the descriptions of her observations/ experiences with participants, the inclusion of folktales, and the incorporation of Waa (the Maasai language) makes for captivating reading. This approach is not only engaging but also achieves the desired effect of capturing both the voices of the schoolgirls and her interaction with them.

Throughout this book, Switzer does a brilliant job of bringing to light the complexities of the context and the paradox of what education promises these girls therein. Her account of Maasai history shows the evolution of perception regarding education and the issues that arise even as perceptions change. It is never as simple as "#BasicMath: Education + Girls = A world of possibilities" (Switzer, 2018: 12). She makes clear her disapproval of the reductive take readily shared by multilateral organisations which brand Maasai girls as victims and their fathers/ community as oppressive. In addition to this clear disapproval, her work shows that it is possible to respect both groups. It is possible to acknowledge and appreciate the reasons behind the choices of both the Maasai fathers and schoolgirls with provocative hopes for their futures.

With this book, Switzer proffers evidence to support a great many ideological arguments, such as the historical underpinnings of Maasai marginalisation and their negative perceptions of education and development linked to the way this "gift" was historically given. There is evidence which shows how neoliberal and Western ideas seep into African communities through global development campaigns founded on the "Girl Effect Logic". Through schooling and campaigns for schooling, girls and women have internalised neoliberal ideas which make them perceive empowerment in an individual and de-politicised form, view education as a master key, and consider the uneducated as "doers of nothing" who contribute in no way to national GDP.

The book illustrates that, though formal education can change a great deal, what is most likely is that it changes the previously excluded people to fit into whatever format has already been established. It likewise presents rich empirical evidence of the motivations for education, and the negotiations girls must undertake on a daily basis between the normative influence of their communities and the informational influence derived at school.

*When the Light is Fire* leaves more to be desired in only one respect: Switzer's analysis suggests a great deal which could (and I feel should) have been explicitly stated as recommendations. Through her analysis, she suggests that due to the pervasiveness of the "Girl Effect Logic" and the development rhetoric pushed for "modernisation" of Kenya, Maasai schoolgirls have internalised certain neoliberalist notions such as, among others, the idea that domestic labour does not count as work; that they must work and earn a salary to be of value (Switzer, 2018: 81-83), and that certain languages are "better" than others. Despite recognising this, Switzer does not state explicitly that this implies that the education being offered here needs decolonising. Elsewhere, Switzer's tone suggests her disdain for "Girl Effect Logic" initiators who paint the use of girls and women to fix the world as "smart economics" while asserting that they do not need to "change everything" but rather simply add girls to the mix (Switzer, 2018: 155). Still, she does not state outright that, a dismantling of foundational inequalities is required for true empowerment. Switzer's analysis asserts that Maasai schoolgirls, as targets of empowerment, are told to be stronger, to avoid the boys who "distract" them, and to work harder to achieve that girl power dream, while no one tells the oppressor to cease oppressive behaviour (Switzer, 2018: 133). And yet, at no point does she critique the empowerment potential of the education offered schoolgirls, given such indoctrination. In Chapter 3, Switzer does well to show that a girl "of the home" could be bolder and wield more agency than a schoolgirl, but fails to draw a conclusion on the likelihood that these girls, should they complete their tenure as schoolgirls, could be considered empowered. Do all the educated live more empowered lives, as the Girl Effect Logic implies? Would they be able to acquire the salaried jobs they have been raised to aspire for as the reward for avoiding "distractions" and performing well? Would they, by virtue of their education, be able to avoid the subordination in marriage they cite as a disadvantage of being uneducated? Switzer does not share any conclusive thoughts on these questions that her analysis inspires the reader to consider.

Perhaps the author leaves the analysis as she does to avoid passing judgement on well-intentioned efforts being made. As she acknowledges in her conclusion, no matter how problematic the narrow space schoolgirls inhabit is, it is still transformative. Thus it would seem, with this book, that she focuses on opening the door to questioning presumptions of what the education these girls receive would actually enable them to be and do as they face the realities of their context and as it seemingly sows in them new vulnerabilities and insecurities. And it is for this reason that this book is worth reading, particularly by scholars and practitioners of gender and education in African contexts. As international discourse moves beyond a focus on access and parity, work such as this one begins a very necessary discussion on the contextual issues surrounding the applicability of girls' education initiatives for their empowerment and community development. Switzer's book will undoubtedly inspire others to continue the work she has begun.

## Contributors

**Akosua K. Darkwah** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana. Her research interests are gender and work and gender and the media. Since the pandemic began, she has turned her attention to the ways in which it has reshaped the nature and character of women's work. In addition to editing and contributing a chapter to this Special Issue, she has, together with Melanie Heath, Josephine Beoku-Betts and Bandana Purkayastha, co-edited a collection on women academics' experiences with COVID-19 titled *Global Feminist Autoethnographies during COVID-19* (Routledge, 2022). She currently serves as the Convenor for the Network for Women's Rights Ghana, Ghana's largest organisation of women's rights groups and individuals.

**Azeenarh Mohammed** is a trained lawyer and a queer, feminist, holistic security trainer who specialises in training not-for-profit organisations on tools and tactics for digital security, physical security and psycho-social wellbeing. She has worked as a state counsel, prosecuting gender-focused crimes against the state; brand manager for LoveNigeria Foundation; Project Manager for Gender Democracy at Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and as a digital security fellow at Open Technology Fund. Azeenarh is active in queer women's issues in Nigeria and has written on gender rights, queerness and technology for publications like The Guardian, This is Africa, Perspectives, and Premium TimesNG.

**Chitra Nagarajan** is an activist, researcher and writer who works to build peace and promote and protect human rights, particularly those of women and girls, predominantly in West Africa. She has been working in civilian protection, climate security, conflict analysis, gender, human rights and peacebuilding in northern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin since 2013. She integrates feminist methodologies and social inclusion throughout her work and is involved in anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist, queer rights and women's rights movements.

**Comfort Mussa** is a prolific multi-award-winning journalist with a keen eye for stories that expose social injustice. She is an advocate for women's and disability rights. For over a decade, Comfort has worked as a reporter, facilitator and strategist

on diverse women's rights, social justice and health issues. Most recently, she received the Commonwealth Point of Light Award from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom for her exceptional voluntary service supporting the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her writings have brought to centre stage many critical stories that would otherwise go unreported in mainstream media in Cameroon and abroad. These stories have inspired change and many important conversations. They have also earned her several global and local recognitions for her brand of journalism. To further amplify the voices of women and minority groups in Cameroon, she founded the platform Sisterspeak237 in 2014.

**Deborah Atobrah** is the Director of the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, both at the University of Ghana. She holds a PhD and an MPhil in African Studies from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Deborah won the Rockefeller Residency Award at the Bellagio Center of the Rockefeller Foundation in 2012 and the Duke University Provost Travel Award in 2013. In 2015, she became a fellow of the prestigious Takemi Program in International Health of the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health. She is also a Catalyst Fellow at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh. She contributed a chapter on Ghana to *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World*, commissioned by UN Women. She is the treasurer of the African Studies Association of Africa.

**Dorte Thorsen** is Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She holds a PhD in African Studies from the University of Sussex and works across the disciplines of Anthropology and Social Geography. She has done research in West Africa since 1997, starting with research on gender relations in rural households in Burkina Faso and moving towards urban areas, following in the footsteps of adolescent migrants, since 2005. Her current work focuses on gender and generational dynamics in mobilities and work, exploring migration patterns, aspirations for a different life and social change. She is the co-author of *Child Migration in Africa* (Zed Books, 2011) and co-editor of *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration* (Routledge, 2017).

**Fatimah Kelleher** is a pan-African feminist engaged in activism, advocacy, research, programming and advice across economic rights and justice, and education and

health. Her work in the economic space looks at African development trajectories. A dual national Nigerian, she has worked extensively on northern Nigerian women's feminist futures, but as a pan-African has worked across the continent. Fatimah works with varied stakeholders, including women's groups, wider civil society, NGOs, UN bodies, national/subnational government bodies and bilateral organisations. She works and publishes at the international level, with additional expertise in South Asia and the Caribbean. She is an Associate of the Nawi Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective. A published author of several books, technical studies, and articles, her work has been published by UNESCO, the Commonwealth and *Feminist Africa*, and her writing can be found in *The Guardian*, *openDemocracy*, *African Arguments*, *Equal Times*, and *Wasafiri*. She also writes and commentates on the African diaspora, political, economic and literary issues in the UK, and is a creative writer and scribbler of verse.

**Irene Appeaning Addo** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Her research areas are Urban Housing Studies, Traditional Architecture and African Urbanisms. She is involved in several projects, including the Andrew Mellon-funded project on *Entanglement, Mobility and Improvisation: Culture and Arts in Contemporary African Urbanism and its Hinterlands*; the ODA-funded project on *Keeping Your Cool: Modern Architectural Heritage and Climatic Comfort in Ghana*, and the British Academy-funded project on *Adaptation and Self-Recovery Solutions for Housing Flooding Resilience in Ghana*. Irene has several journal publications and book chapters to her credit. Her recent publications include *Genealogies of Ghana's Housing Crisis: The Role of Colonial Interventions and Neoliberal Reforms* (International Journal of Housing Policy, 2021) and *New Homes for a New State: Foreign Ideas in Ghana's Public Housing Programmes*.

**Jacqueline-Bethel T. Mougoué** is an interdisciplinary historian and Assistant Professor of African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, with additional affiliations in the Department of History and the Department of Gender and Women's Studies. She is the author of *Gender, Separatist Politics and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (University of Michigan Press, 2019). Mougoué sits on the editorial boards for *Feminist Africa*, *Journal of Women's History*, and *Gender & History*.

**Leah Eryenyu** is an emerging political economy analyst deploying pan-African and intersectional feminist tools of inquiry to examine and understand systemic injustices and their manifestations. Her work looks at the intersection of economic exploitation and gender oppression, focusing on illicit financial flows and decent work for women. She is interested in challenging and dismantling structural inequalities in a world increasingly controlled by plutocrats. She presently serves as Head of Programmes at Akina Mama wa Afrika, where she provides strategic leadership to three programmes across seven African countries in the thematic areas of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Women's Economic Justice and Climate Action, and Women's Political Leadership. She has a proven track record in strategy development, conceptualising and convening spaces for debate and critical inquiry, and providing thought leadership through research and writing.

**Madeleine Wayack-Pambè** is an Associate Professor of Demography at the Institut Supérieur des Sciences de la Population, Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Ouagadougou. Her research covers a wide range of topics related to the demographic and social transformations of modern African societies, with a common thread of questioning and analysing from a gender perspective. Her research also addresses methodological and ethical issues related to research in sensitive or fragile contexts. She is particularly interested in understanding the interrelationships between these transformations, education and gender-based violence. Recently, her work has focused on gender socialisation, the impact of gender-based violence on women's economic empowerment and mechanisms for responding to sexual violence against adolescent girls and women.

**Mjiba Frehiwot** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. She received her PhD from Howard University, where she focused her research on the role of formal and informal education in building pan-African consciousness in Ghana from 1957 to 1966. Her primary research focuses on pan-Africanism, African political thought, decolonising evaluation and social movements in Global Africa. She is involved in several projects, including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 30th Anniversary Early Career Scholar Program initiative, *Afro-Asian Futures Past*, and *Re-Invigorating Humanities Research at The University of Ghana (Rehure)*, also funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. She released her documentary, "Umoja: Africa Must Unite Now" (2021) at the Kwame Nkrumah Intellectual Festival.

**Monique Kwachou** is a writer, youth worker and researcher of gender studies and education for development. She holds a dual honours BSc in Gender Studies and Sociology from the University of Buea, an MA in Education, Gender and International Development from University College London's Institute of Education, and a PhD in Development Studies from the University of the Free State (South Africa). Monique's research interests generally centre on African feminisms, engendering education, critical pedagogy and capabilitarian analysis of education and interventions for development. Prior to her current engagement as a postdoctoral research fellow with the Higher Education and Human Development Research Group of the University of the Free State, she worked at the University of Buea, Cameroon, as a full-time students' affairs officer and a part-time instructor for the Department of Women and Gender studies.

**Olabukunola (Buky) Williams** is currently the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Program Lead at Akina Mama Wa Afrika, a feminist pan-African leadership development organisation founded in 1985 by a group of visionary African women. She recently stepped down as Executive Director of Education as A Vaccine, an organisation that works with young people to advance their rights to health and protection from all forms of violence in Nigeria. She is a feminist and was named a Malala Education Champion in 2020.

**Oluwakemi M. Balogun** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Sociology at the University of Oregon. Her work focuses on gender, globalisation, nationalism, race, ethnicity and migration. She is the author of *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* (Stanford University Press, 2020). She is also the co-editor of *Africa Every Day: Fun, Leisure, and Expressive Culture on the Continent* (Ohio University Press, 2019). Her work has been published in outlets such as *African Studies Review*, *Ethnicities* and *Gender & Society*.

**Peace Kiguwa** is Associate Professor in Psychology at the School of Human and Community Development, the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Her research interests include critical social psychology, affective politics of gender and sexuality, racism and racialisation, and the nuances of teaching and learning. She has served as Chair of the Sexuality and Gender Division of the Psychology Society

of South Africa and is recent recipient of the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Rising Star Fellowship at the University of the Witwatersrand.

**Shamillah Wilson** is a South African feminist consultant. Her areas of focus include movement building and feminist organisational development. She has worked with feminist organisations, movements and women's funds in Africa and other parts of the Global South.

**Simidele Dosekun** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research centres black African women to explore questions of gender, race, subjectivity and power in a global context. She is the author of *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2020) and co-editor of *African Luxury: Aesthetics and Politics* (Intellect Books, 2019). She is a member of the editorial collectives for the journals *Feminist Africa* and *Feminist Theory*.

**Thobeka Nkomo** is an Associate Professor in Social Work. A researcher, author and academic at the University of the Witwatersrand, her research includes spirituality and health in the areas of forgiveness, gender dynamics, ethics and values, young women's leadership, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights. She is an affiliated researcher with the Sex Rights Africa Network's menstrual hygiene project in partnership with the AIDS Foundation South Africa. She is actively involved in collaborative research with scientists across Africa. As a leader with a keen interest in developing the next generation of academics, Thobeka Nkomo is a member of the Women Intellectuals Transforming Scholarship in Education, a project which is part of a Southern African Development Community network of women academics.

**Tracy Jean-Pierre** is the founder of ENZA, an organisation that works to improve health and justice access for women in the Global South.

**Vainola Makan** is a feminist and gender and social justice activist who has worked in the non-profit sector for more than 25 years. She has a BA from the University of the Western Cape with Sociology and Psychology as major subjects. She is a Research Associate of Transformation of Education for Sustainable Futures. This research

was sponsored and coordinated as part of the South African hub of Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures projects based at Rhodes University. The research paper was delivered at the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa Conference, hosted by the Mauritius Institute of Education, and published as part of the conference proceedings. She has worked on gender training, participatory action research, women's empowerment, masculinity work with boys and young men, and the interlinkages of social justice, gender and environmental issues. During COVID-19, she initiated a Women Support Group and worked on a book project entitled *Web of Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in the Western Cape*. She was involved in building several grassroots women's movements, including New Women's Movement, and is co-founder of Sisterhood Movement. She is a member of the global network, International Network for Violence against Women, associate of Ubuntu Rural Women's Movement, and co-founder of the Grassroots Community Gender-Based Violence Alliance.

**Veronica Bekoe** was employed by the Ghana Ministry of Health in 1972 as a Biological Scientist. She was posted to the Public Health and Reference Laboratory (PHRL) and had the opportunity to work with diseases of public health interest, the main ones being Cholera and HIV. She acted briefly as Head of PHRL in 2005. Upon retirement in 2008, she joined the National AIDS Control Program (NACP) as the focal point for testing. At PHRL, she played a significant role in the training of health care workers nationwide in HIV testing and infection prevention and control. She was instrumental in the restructuring and establishing of public health laboratories under a USAID project. With the NACP, she played a major role in preparing several laboratories for accreditation of the WHO SLAMTA/SLIPTA program sponsored by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, USA.

**Vicci Tallis** is a lesbian feminist activist who is passionate about addressing women's rights. She is a Research Fellow, Humanities, University of Pretoria.

**Wangari Kinoti** is the Thematic Lead for Women's Rights and Feminist Alternatives at ActionAid International. She is a feminist and pan-Africanist who, over the last two decades, has worked in various programmatic and policy advocacy roles in national and regional women's rights organisations and in the international women's rights and social justice arena. She has led work on political participation, gender-based

violence, land rights, corporate accountability, extractives, unpaid labour and access to decent work, public services and social protection. Her research, analysis and ideas are anchored by feminist analysis and informed by feminist alternatives to redistribute power and resources to address global inequalities and achieve system change. Wangari is actively engaged in pan-African and South/Third World feminist activist spaces with an interest in contributing to shaping radical, transformative and caring futures. She is an Associate of the Nawi Afrifem Macroeconomics Collective.

**Wendy Pekeur** is a feminist and gender activist with 20 years of experience in land activism and labour rights. She served as General Secretary of the first women-led trade union in South Africa, Sikhula Sonke, for eight years. She is a Labour Law practitioner and does Arbitration and Conciliation at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) for unlawful dismissals of workers across sectors. She serves as a Human Rights Monitor for the South African Human Rights Commission and is Human Rights Defender with the Women's Legal Centre. She is the Founder of Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement, which is a vehicle for rural women's voices to be heard. She is co-founder of Sisterhood Movement, an organisation that builds leadership capacities of girls, and co-founder of the Grassroots Gender-Based Violence Alliance. She has won several international and national awards and recognition for her work. She was co-researcher for the research done by Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth during Covid-19.

A publication of the
Institute of African Studies
University of Ghana

Kwame Nkrumah Complex
Annie Jiagge Road
University of Ghana

P.O. Box LG 73
Legon, Accra.
Tel: + 233-302-213850
+233-303-213820 ext. 2051
Email: iasgen@ug.edu.gh

Websites: https://feministafrica.net/
https://ias.ug.edu.gh/