

FEMINIST AFRICA



Call for Papers

Reclaiming Women's Play: Gender, Wellbeing and the Changing African Play Cultures

Deadline for Submissions: 30th June, 2024

All submissions and enquiries should be emailed to:

contact@feministafrica.net (cc) info@feministafrica.net

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Introduction

In her book *“Play Like a Feminist”*, Shira Chess (2020) urges women to spend more time playing, as a tool of radical disruption against not only sexism but against all other intersectional forms of exclusion based on sexuality, religion, ethnicity, race and class. Along with many other indigenous knowledge systems, very few traditional African games and forms of play have survived the onslaught of modernity and development in the post-independence period. Although some traditional forms of play and gaming such as wrestling in Senegal and board games have survived, the majority of indigenous play cultures, particularly those of African women, have been disrupted and are now only occasionally performed at cultural festivals and events. Colonialism with its religious and patriarchal bias, imported with it the idea that Africans were lazy and frivolous by nature, as opposed to having purpose such as “to strive arduously for knowledge, for excellence and virtue, for fame and honor, for power and prosperity” (Fink, Saine, and Saine 1968,19). With a mission to discipline and civilize the African working class, colonial

governments introduced the so-called organised sports to target them through schools, mine work, civil service, churches and armies. Young African women at mission schools were able to participate in sports such as tennis, field hockey, netball and basketball; however, for most, their involvement was short-lived and limited to their time in school (Sikes 2018). Seen as frivolity, traditional play and gaming are often contrasted with “serious and responsible activities” and not given their rightful place as basic and essential human phenomenon (Fink, Saine, and Saine 1968:19). For African women, traditional play cultures and gaming space were further drastically altered by the post-independence neo-colonial, and nationalistic ideas of womanhood that policed their bodies and denied them bodily autonomy (Mcfadden 2004).

Neo-liberal thinking and its preference for market solutions, and the advent of authoritarian States on the continent, led to a devaluation and diminishing of women’s space for play and playfulness, as well as a disproportionate burden of reproductive activities or care work on women. As production systems and economic policies failed to deliver a decent living to many, their burden of care work increased (Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks 2009). Also, over time, women’s experience of play and how it resonates with various aspects of their lives has evolved significantly, with likely predictors such as urbanity, education, marriage, and occupation.

The feminist response has been largely to undo the idea of feminine frivolity, often by disavowing women’s play, because “feminists have work to do...we have too much work to make time for play” (Chess 2020:6-7). This perspective has been so pervasive that according to Dutta (2022:403), “feminists, and feminisms, have [also] attained a...reputation or stereotype of being humourless and killjoys.” For African feminists, this has been compounded by the additional postcolonial humanitarian urgency of the situations that feminists work under; of failed States and flailing neo-liberal economies inundated with foreign debt; the legacy of structural adjustment policies, poverty, ethnic tensions, racism, militarism and sexism. It therefore is no surprise that play and gaming as feminist praxis have received very little attention in African feminist debates. With the exception of academic works on the politics of women in football and other formerly male-dominated organised sports (Engh M. 2010; Ogunniyi 2015), there is not sufficient African feminist attention to women and play historically, epistemologically, ontologically, and functionally. The growing presence of women in organised sport has to some extent contributed to challenging heteronormative gender stereotypes, but sport as a social institution continues to perpetuate gendered ideologies of the naturalness of men’s privilege and domination in society (Engh M. H. 2012).

As African cultures of play and gaming diminished, sports and digital gaming grew as an industry, facilitated by new information technologies and a neo-liberal market system. However, digital gaming has continued to carry with it the same online inequalities that exist offline because gender, class, and race hierarchies have been carried onto the Internet (Nakamura 2000).

Play and gaming, for women, have the potential to contribute towards the project of decoloniality of power, knowledge and wellbeing, by providing the so-called occupational consciousness. This

approach calls for mobilisation, as well as vigilance and a fresh perspective on self and collective healing in ways that address colonial traumas and Africa's oppressive past. Rather than reinscribe the very colonial traumas women need to heal from, it calls for more reflexive approaches to personal and collective health whose epistemologies, ontologies and histories are not derived from the very oppressive and dominant practices defined by our colonial past. This extends to organised group sports, such as football, and their gender segmentation, while drawing attention to how Africans have embraced some of these sports as national and local pride as well as potential professions.

For women, play is personal, political and also functional. There is an increasing body of work on the role of sport and physical activity in areas as diverse as international development, peace building and conflict resolution (Darnell et al. 2018). There is also a growing interest in traditional play as a therapeutic tool in psychotherapy for both children and adults, especially for trauma survivors (Kekae-Moletsane 2008; Mnetwa and Hoosain 2021). The early childhood development and learning space has drawn from classical play theories and set out to decolonise the field to become more sensitive to the particularities of African contexts and histories (Marfo and Biersteker 2011).

This issue of Feminist Africa is devoted to understanding the gendered evolutions of play within the context of colonialism, neoliberalism and other epochs in Africa from diverse disciplinary perspectives. Feminist perspectives are invited to bring to the centre, an analysis of play that explores what Lashika Renee Lockhart calls "womanish" modes of play; ways in which African women communicate, seek, and negotiate meaning in the world (Lockhart 2012). We go beyond the dichotomies of frivolity and work, to unlock the possibilities that lie in the threatened relationship between enjoyment and execution, bodily autonomy and collective healing towards collective joy. In African play cultures, autonomy and pleasure in an activity are more central to defining play than the activity itself (Akyeampong and Ambler 2002). Decolonising play has the potential of reclaiming its centrality towards women's freedom to productive, reproductive, self and collective care, and for catalysing human engagement approaches. How we play, how we talk about play, what shapes our opinions of play and the future of play, are all embedded in how we allow play to liberate our bodies and release fear. Often when we play, our hearts race and we release a smile after a good game because we are alive, and free, even for a moment. While the body plays, the mind recharges and defies the politics around play in all the themes we seek to expound. We invite papers focusing on play as a decolonial project and feminist perspectives that explore lost traditions of women's play and how they came to be lost, new forms of feminist play and the future of play including but not limited to:

- Women and play from historical, ontological and epistemological perspectives.
- The changing context, history and evolution of play, including which forms of play and gaming have disappeared, which have survived and thrive, and why.
- The gendered character of play and gaming.
- Constructions, histories and changes in play/gaming.

- Play/gaming from functional and political perspectives, such as:
 - as bodies of resistance;
 - as freedom from time;
 - as ways of being, lifestyles and authentic language;
 - as activism, and as tools for mobilising and organising
 - as a tool for learning;
 - as the oxygen of our being;
 - as parenting mechanisms;
 - as work;
 - as therapy.

IMPORTANT DATES

June 30th 2024: Deadline for submission of abstracts ends.

July 30th 2024: Authors notified of accepted abstracts.

October 30th 2024: Submission of papers ends.

Direct all enquiries and submissions to contact@feministafrica.net and copy info@feministafrica.net.

Do also specify that your submission is for **“Reclaiming Women’s Play: Gender, Wellbeing and the Changing African Play Cultures”**

Download the Feminist Africa Editorial Policy and Style Guide at: <https://feministafrica.net/>

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