

Editorial

Rethinking African Feminisms in the “New” Normal

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Introduction: Shedding the old

Since the turn of the century, the world has changed radically, making it unrecognisable to activists who came of age in the 20th century. Yuval Harari’s provocative book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, lays out current global historical, political, technological, religious, and ecological crises plus numerous other issues of interest. He asks the poignant question: “[W]hen the old stories have collapsed... what should we do in life? What kinds of skills do we need?” (2018, xiii). African feminists have been pondering similar questions for some time now, individually and collectively, attempting to weave together new stories to replace old tropes dictating how to challenge the complex and ever-changing manifestations of imperialism, oppression, and inequality. During this day and age, how do we jettison the universal narrative of “deficiency” about Africa and change it to one of dynamism and potential? Or, to borrow from Chinua Achebe, how do we continue to pursue the project of “re-storying” ourselves and reclaiming our humanity in the 21st century with vigour (2000, 79)?

This issue of *Feminist Africa* takes on the challenge of telling new stories of African women in the context of the “new” normal, offering fresh theorisations about our engagements with contemporary hegemonic and systemic trends. At the same time, the articles reiterate the fact that for many ordinary African women, this “new” normal is not so new. Indeed, the use of quotation marks here signals the partial novelty in the “new” normal. While there are certainly new developments in the nature of the contemporary drivers of oppression and privilege, their building blocks remain the underlying quest for profit and power. Similarly, the stories of the marginalised and oppressed may have changed in

surface details, but the tone and language are still very relatable. Activists within the African feminist movement are tightening the knots around their colourful wrappers, ready to take on the reinvented patriarchal-capitalist bull by its horns.¹

With the exponential growth of digital technology, the scourge wreaked by the global COVID-19 pandemic, climate change extremes, and China as the latest coloniser, we, as African feminists, have been forced to rethink our contemporary activist agendas. Not only does this involve revisiting conceptual frameworks and redirecting and reprioritising African or Afro-feminist goals, it also entails changing our advocacy strategies and carefully (re)selecting allies in the struggle. Digital and social media advocacy has made it possible for millions of people to interact through online platforms, video conferencing tools, and other cyber-based means. The COVID-19 pandemic multiplied flexible arrangements of interaction, greatly facilitating remote employment and confirming what feminists have been saying for decades: the lines separating the public and private spheres of work are illogical and gendered. We are also experiencing the extreme impacts of environmental hazards which pose new threats to women's livelihoods and health. Meanwhile, a new phase of global capitalism has unleashed more insidious forms of imperialism, deepening patriarchal capitalism's hold on the world. Moreover, a renewed interest in Africa in the 21st century has manifested through multiplied pressures on land and other resources on the continent.

All these developments pose both opportunities and threats to African feminist work on the continent. They imply that we must critically engage and disrupt the "business as usual" approaches to our theorisation and activism in the context of this "new" normal. Ironically, the majority of 21st century women's movements on the continent remain stuck in the last century, dealing with 20th century challenges. Exacerbating the problem, the roots of coloniality cemented in existing structures, policies, norms, and mindsets, continue to inform and shape our understandings of gender, rights, and justice (Falola 2005; Tamale 2020). In order to realise gender justice and transformation in Africa, Akhona Nkenkana (2015) urges us to acquire clarity about the connection between the coloniality of being and the coloniality of power. This means that we must stop basing activism on the same historical logic that has brought us thus far. We need to reconceptualise normalised concepts, such as gender and sexuality,

patriarchy, rights, equality, and development that are essentialised and binaried. These fundamental ontological and epistemological transformations constitute the prelude to inventing new stories of African feminist activism. They are the critical tools that will free us from the proverbial hamster wheel which we seem eternally condemned to tread.

To be clear, although the two terms share the basic objective of liberating women from the capitalist-patriarchal system, the term “African feminist movement” is quite distinct from a “women’s movement” in Africa (Tamale 2006). The latter is more liberal-oriented and traditionally institutionalised in civil society (and even the state), focusing on incorporating women’s rights and freedoms into existing institutions. On the other hand, the former is relatively new, smaller, and more disruptive of normative taken-for-granted institutions (e.g., the state, law, family, religion, education) and dominant assumptions (including those undergirding notions like rights, gender, power, identity, justice, etc.); we focus on engendering revolutionary transformations. Moreover, while the Afro-feminist movement is anti-imperialist, the women’s movement tends to use “BandAid” reformist approaches which hardly shake the roots of hegemonic power. This distinction is important when discussing strategies to counter Africa’s gender problems in the prevailing global context.

Consequently, the authors in this issue of *Feminist Africa* examine and analyse some of the above issues through the combined feminist, Afrocentric and decolonial lenses. The selected articles are derived from reworked presentations delivered at a successful four-day *Feminist Africa* conference held between 29 May and 1 June 2023 in Kampala, Uganda, under the theme, “Re-Strategising African Feminist Activisms for the ‘New’ Normal”. Forty African feminist activists from around the continent attended in person—thinkers and researchers from academia, human rights organisations, and grant-making entities—while hundreds more attended virtually. The formalised and edited papers published here provide only a small fraction of the deep-level discussions and reflections that happened in the conference hall and in the breakout rooms. They hardly do justice to the electrifying mood of the rooms filled with reinvigorating words of hope and change.

At the conference, paper after paper built up an astoundingly vivid simulacrum of the new geopolitical scramble for our richly endowed continent

and its implications for our ecosystems and environment, our livelihoods, our security, and our gender diversities. Moreover, the upsurge of militarisation on the continent is intimately connected to this process. The first paper by Charmaine Pereira succinctly describes these processes, setting up a backdrop for the rest of the articles. Pereira presents the historical evolution of geopolitical relations between African countries and the rest of the world. She explains that, in addition to the imperialisms of yesterday that invaded our continent, we now have new forms of exploitation perpetrated by the so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). While Pereira discusses the involvement of China, India, and Russia in Africa, she argues that the portrayal of these countries as major exploiters of Africa often obscures the continued role of Western imperial powers in the extraction of African resources. Of course, the pillaging of Africa's resources—including diamonds, bauxite, copper, coltan, fossil fuels, and extending to land, sand, palm oil, cocoa, timber, and even human beings (particularly women and girls who are trafficked into sexual slavery and/or the exploitative care labour industry)—is executed with the collusion of a class of domestic political elite only interested in accumulating wealth for themselves with little consideration for the consequences for the *wananchi*.² Pereira draws on recent empirical studies to weave a story of the diverse ways that women on the continent experience and respond to the direct and structural violence resulting from these “new” realities.

Some of these realities are vividly demonstrated in the standpoint piece by Natacha Bruna who unmasks contemporary climate mitigation policies and practices. Her exposé reveals how such policies are implemented on the backs of rural women, perpetuating inequalities both at the local and geopolitical levels. We also gain some insights into the adverse effects of climate change on rural African women from the captivating conversation piece between Chido Nyaruwata and Zimbabwean farmer, Martha Gorimani. Through Gorimani's story, we are offered a close-up of the practical challenges faced by rural women in this era of climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity.

Re-evaluating the past

The success of Europe's imperialism, particularly in Africa, was not so much defined by the colonisation and occupation of foreign lands, but by the capture of the *minds* of the colonised people, including many contemporary activists. Hence, *neocolonialism* is effectively achieved through institutions such as education, religion, laws, and the media—institutions that continue to confine our minds decades after the achievement of flag independence. *Neocolonialism* explains why most of the strategies adopted by African women's movements and the ideologies informing their activism do not allow for critical insights that effectively challenge the *structures* and *ideologies* of racist imperialist capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Instead, they continue to work with concepts (e.g., gender, race, class, and sexuality) rooted in paradigms that promote the same oppressive systems and frameworks to which we are opposed. Such an approach can do little to shift unjust power relations. The Afro-feminist movement is better equipped to provide the critical insights necessary to shift the unjust power relations.

The liberalisation of Africa's economies in the late 1980s particularly accelerated the process of depoliticising women's organising. Through the process of NGO-isation, neoliberalism placed blinders on the scope of African women's theorisations, essentially turning them into its handmaidens to fill the gaps created by dismantled welfare services and the privatisation of social services. Uganda is a poignant example of how this process panned out within the women's movement. The women's movement in Africa continues to adopt the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) uncritically into its activist agendas, despite the clear neoliberal frameworks and rationalities of the SDGs (c.f. Struckmann 2018).³ As the first African country to embrace neoliberal policy reforms in the 1980s, Uganda remains one of the "blue-eyed" countries for the World Bank (at least before passing the Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023). By pursuing our goals through colonial frameworks of development and liberal global feminism, we become complicit in "window dressing" structural oppression and legitimising neoliberalism. Elżbieta Korolczuk (2016, 33) reminds us that,

Most feminist thinkers and activists agree that neoliberalism—as ideology and as practice—is one of the biggest challenges that contemporary women’s movements face. According to some of them, however, (Western) feminism has not only failed to counteract this trend, but has played an important role in the project of corporate globalization.

It is thus clear that such actions can only lead us back to the proverbial hamster wheel that impedes real progress. We need to heed the counsel of the eSwatini feminist scholar, Patricia McFadden (2007, 36-38) who urges African feminists,

[T]o imagine and conceptually craft new thinking tools; new imaginaries that will enable us to push our political agendas of human and social transformation forward...we need to refresh our feminist politics by re-visiting the critical notions of supremacy and impunity, and show how they underpin capitalist and class privilege all over the world.

In answer to this clarion call, Lyn Ossome’s insightful and bold article unpacks structural gendered violence through a decolonial lens, urging African feminists to see “the state both from the vantage point of those who experience its violence, and from the subjective positionality of the colonised” (page 46). Her point is that it is important to recognise the ongoing relationship between the structural violence foundational to colonialism and the modern postcolonial state. By so doing, the strategic engagements and research questions that African feminists pose will fundamentally change, leading to more effective results. Hence, we need to begin thinking about the political economy of gendered relations in decolonial terms. Ossome argues that while states are defined and framed by masculinity, they are clearly sustained by women’s labour. She urges African feminists to understand violence not in the narrow sense of individual acts of aggression, but as constitutive of political, juridical, and societal structures that daily shape our lives.

Ossome’s paper reinforces the point that Black women’s productive and reproductive labour are (and have always been) central to imperialist and capitalist accumulation (a point reiterated by Leah Eryenyu in this issue). This echoes Hortense Spillers’ poignant words: “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (1987, 65). The postcolonial nation state continues to hinge its legitimacy on women’s labour and, as is evident in many African countries today, nation-building is based on gendered and homophobic

discourses, extractivism, and militarism. Osome reminds us that the ongoing (re)construction of Africa as an essentially heterosexual continent is part of the structural violence exerted against the colonised in the postcolony (also see Tamale 2011; Ngwenya 2018). She reiterates the notion of “captivity” arguing that democracy’s key institutions for social reproduction (i.e., the state, the market, and the household) are implicated in structural violence because democracy is predicated on the captivity of the colonised. Osome’s analysis makes a valuable contribution to the emerging African feminist literature on the complex concept of structural violence.

Embracing the new

Nanjala Nyabola provocatively invites us to broaden our view of the concept of “African feminism”. This involves two shifts in the conceptualisation of the term. First, given the diverse contexts and multiple experiences of oppression around the continent, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon as always existing in the plural. Secondly, and most importantly, we need to use African feminism as a practical tool for answering the “how” political questions that presently bedevil Africa. Anchoring the analysis on her personal scholarly journey of investigating digital politics in Kenya, Nyabola prompts an exploration of new areas of consideration in the field of African feminist digital scholarship. African feminism is a critical methodology for unpacking social and political transformation. Echoing bell hooks’ love ethic theory, Nyabola makes a case for feminism to be reconceptualised as an intellectual practice—one “fuelled by love as a political and personal value, driven by a desire to make the world a better place for current and future generations, as well as an improved relationship with the natural environment” (page 95). Accordingly, Nyabola argues that the political resistance by African women to patriarchy is radical and historically located outside formal institutions because “[i]t is a method that deconstructs institutionalism and formalism in favour of utility and meaning, without compromising rigour and generalisability” (page 108). This is why African feminism works.

The opportunities and challenges posed by digital technology for African feminists are further addressed by Nkem Agunwa’s absorbing profile piece. She analyses real life examples to examine the various ways that this technology

has changed the nature and extent of gender-based violence on the continent. Agunwa highlights some key dilemmas that have emerged in the digital age—from co-opting and distorting feminist principles to reconceptualising old legal concepts such as rape in view of acts of virtual simulated gang rapes. Most importantly, she spotlights the significance of the online space as a powerful and transformative tool for propelling African feminist resistance and activism to new levels. The #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa is discussed as one of several examples. Agunwa ends her article cryptically by showing African feminists some of the ways that they can illuminate the silver lining of online space to overcome its challenges and harness its potential for charting a better future.

Leah Eryenyu’s compelling paper focuses on the transnational domestic work industry that has exploded on the continent in the last 20 years. Although a somewhat new phenomenon, it echoes the forced migration of African women to the Americas for domestic and caring work between the 16th and 19th centuries; even though described as “voluntary”, there are dire structural forces which compel such movement. Furthermore, while the contemporary exportation of transnational care may be relatively new to Africa, Asian women have been exported around the world for domestic and caring work since the 1960s. For example, after the newly-discovered oil in the Gulf States in the 60s and 70s, East Asian women domestic workers were (and continue to be) on high demand there (Schewel and Debray 2024).

Using Uganda as a case study, Eryenyu reveals how some African states mediate the migration infrastructure. This allows young women domestic workers to be exploited and abused in the Gulf States in order to solve the persistent problem of unemployment in their countries of origin. Through these state-inspired migration programmes, thousands of marginalised African women are objectified and grossly abused. Eryenyu’s rigorous analysis of the discourse in the two main Ugandan newspapers highlights the intersection between racial, gender, and class structures of oppression that extends from the linguistic level upwards into social, political, and historical realities. The well-oiled (pun intended) machinery of capitalist accumulation facilitates the instrumentalisation and social reproduction of women as cheap migration labour under exploitative conditions through language. Eryenyu concludes that the “struggle for gender and racial justice is located within the realm of discourse” (page 86).

Conclusion: Looking ahead...

When those of us fighting for gender justice in Africa look back on the last 40 years, we can take pride in the achievements of our heightened political consciousness and agency. We have made significant and sweeping advancements across the continent in securing formal legal protections for girls and women. Despite our efforts, however, inequality and gender-based violence persist; substantive gender justice continues to elude Africa. Our activism seems to be missing something significant that is needed for real progress.

The papers in this issue of *Feminist Africa* strongly suggest that we must return to the drawing board to closely re-examine the structures, conditions, and institutions that reproduce inequalities and oppression. What seems clear is that it is time to switch our theoretical lens from the narrow hegemonic liberalism that still relies on imperialist preconceptions to the more critical decolonial lens in grappling with gender injustice in the context of the “new” normal. There is a need to adopt those epistemic tools that will disrupt business as usual and provide access to “histories and visions created outside the panoptical control of the Empire and the postcolonial state” (Begenzi 2023, 1). African feminists must therefore take seriously those ontological and epistemological roots of non-Western ways of thinking, knowing, and being that make humanity wholesome and more meaningful (Smith 2012; Tamale 2020). In short, it is time to shed the old “tried and tested” ways of engaging oppression; rupture our structural intimacy with global capitalist-patriarchy; and re-shape the processes of knowledge creation and their application to concepts such as gender, power, violence, race, identity, and sexuality.

The clarion call for African feminists to adopt fresh, transformative thinking tools is not new. Many African feminists have sounded alarm bells about how we conceptualise and “do” feminism in Africa (e.g., see Oyewumi 2002; McFadden 2007; Getachew 2019). On 13 January this year, one of Africa’s most visionary African feminist thinkers, Marnia Lazreg, passed on at the age of 83. Two decades prior to her passing, she published a standpoint piece in *Feminist Africa* which rings true today. She portrayed the African feminist movement as being at a crossroad (Lazreg 2004). Even back then, Lazreg was urging the African feminist movement to “reinvent itself” in a “changed world”, to develop

“a ruthless critique of emerging ideologies...” (2004, 70-71). Crucially, Lazreg implored African feminists on the continent to shun external funding to “get off the international dole” and be self-sustaining for autonomous action and creative thinking (2004, 72). I would like to think that this issue of *Feminist Africa* is one small step in “restorying” Afro-feminism and honouring the memory of this Algerian comrade by heeding her powerful and haunting words.

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Notes

1. Note that in this editorial, I make reference to “African feminist movement” and “African women’s movement”; I use “movement” in the singular advisedly, not because I am unaware of the plurality and complexity of such movements on the continent, but to highlight the bifurcation in the general ideologies and modus operandi, regardless of location.
2. *Wananchi* is Swahili for “ordinary folk”.
3. See, for example, the National Women’s Manifesto of Uganda (2021-2026), which relies heavily on the Sustainable Development Goals. The manifesto is meant to “bring to the fore women’s demands based on priority gender issues that continue to impede women of Uganda from attaining full dignity and equality with men in all spheres of lives... on the journey towards gender equality, equity and transformation” (UWONET 2020, 4-5).

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