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Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

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Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

Contents

Editorial: **1**

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education 1

---By Mjiba Frehiwot and Asanda-Jonas Benya

Features **16**

Towards a living archive of Pan-African Feminist Popular Education 16

---By Asanda-Jonas Benya and Mjiba Frehiwot

Feminist Pan-Africanism and NEPU Women's Education in Northern Nigeria, 1951-1979 56

---By Mubarak Tukur

Cultivating Seeds of Transformation: Reflections on Feminist Popular Education from Mozambique 74

---By Solange Rocha, Ana Baloi, Nicole Rigon and Izélquia Mondlhane

Theory in Action: A Pan-Africanist Online African Feminist Reading Group 98

---By Corinne Knowles, Linda Mensah and Mathe Ntšekhe

In Conversation **123**

Women's Mobilization and Activism for Peace in Cameroon 123

---Asanda-Jonas Benya speaks with Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo

Reconnecting Experiences to Politics: Purposeful in Conversation 132

---Boikanyo Modungwa speaks with Dr Ramatu Bangura and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli

Pan-African Popular Education in Motion: A Conversation with Towards Feminist Consciousness Collective 144

---Mjiba Frehiwot and Ramatu Issah speak with Mena Souilem and Mai Panaga

Book Reviews **157**

Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa by Naminata Diabete. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. 157

---By Ololade Faniyi

Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective From the Global South, edited by Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana and Karl von Holdt. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022. 164

-By Asanda-Jonas Benya

Tribute **170**

For Sethunya and the Legacy She Left Us: A Tribute to Dr Sethunya Tshepho Mosime 170

---By FA Collective

Contributors **172**

Editorial

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

Mjiba Frehiwot and Asanda-Jonas Benya

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Popular Education as a Political Project

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

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

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

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

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

Digital Activism and Popular Education

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

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

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

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

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

Popular Education as Resistance

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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Towards a Living Archive of Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

Asanda-Jonas Benya and Mjiba Frehiwot

Abstract

This article is a pan-African feminist intervention in popular education practices and discourses in Africa. We provide a broad overview of popular education's genealogy in Africa. The first section examines conceptions of popular education, exploring conceptual contestations and practical challenges. We identify four periods in Africa's popular education development, and these periods have distinct characteristics ranging from oppositional, to supportive, co-opted, and critical. This historical overview enables us to historicise the emergence of feminist popular education, which was in response to blind spots identified by popular education feminists and pan-African feminists. Drawing from these critiques, we advocate a pan-African feminist approach to popular education. To that end, we make several key interventions in feminist popular education literature. First, we argue that African women have long engaged in pan-African feminist popular education to address gender-specific oppressions. Secondly, we situate pan-African feminist and women's contributions within the broader feminist popular education body of work. Lastly, we demonstrate how contemporary popular education practices draw from these historical foundations. Our key argument is that properly grasping practices and conceptualisations of feminist popular education in Africa requires examining historical archives and discourses through an expanded lens that acknowledges forms of popular education that are not explicitly labelled as feminist. We thus advocate for a pan-African feminist popular education approach that recognises often undocumented grassroots initiatives led by and involving African women.

Keywords: feminism, popular education, liberatory education, pan-Africanism, feminist archives

Introduction

While the theorisation of feminist popular education in Africa is relatively recent, going back to the 1980s, its practices have a more extended history. This article is a pan-African feminist intervention in the evolving landscape and debates in this field. Rather than a comprehensive mapping of studies on the topic, we highlight popular education practices with a feminist or gender and women's angle to them and make a case for an expansive conceptualisation, which we call pan-African feminist popular education. While we remain global in our outlook, we intentionally draw extensively from work by African scholars to situate both conceptualisations and practices of this pan-African feminist popular education in the continent.

The first section examines conceptual contestations and practical challenges of popular education. We then provide a broad overview of popular education's genealogy in Africa, identifying four distinct periods of popular education that have shaped its practices across the continent: the colonial period, which influenced popular education's radical edge; the early post-independence period, when popular education, on the main, supported newly formed governments and became aligned with nation-building efforts and the development goals of new African states; and the post-structural adjustment period where popular education was split into two main approaches: one stream maintained opposition to state policies and structural adjustment, while the other became co-opted by political parties, governments, and also foreign funders who stepped in to fill gaps left by retreating state services. The impact of economic liberalisation policies significantly shaped this period. Finally, in the contemporary period, popular education initiatives maintain the oppositional stance of previous eras while expanding their scope to address multiple actors and systems beyond state institutions. An addition during this time has been the incorporation of environmental concerns, sexuality, and the language of extractivism into the popular education agenda, suggesting a more complex understanding of power relations, social change, and the deepening crises of capitalism, which touches all aspects of life. We argue that understanding these distinct periods is crucial for comprehending the emergence and conceptualisation of feminist popular education in Africa.

This historical mapping enables us to trace the emergence of feminist popular education. Here, we highlight the gaps and blind spots, especially concerning the systematic marginalisation of African women's contributions to and practices of popular education. We argue that African women have long engaged in pan-African feminist popular education to address gender-specific oppressions; but to comprehend practices of feminist popular education in Africa, one needs to query the archive and discourses of popular education and adopt an expansive lens that recognises practices of popular education that do not necessarily use the feminist popular education discourse. We are therefore making a case for pan-African feminist popular education that recognises a wide range of conscientising 'grassroots' initiatives by African women. To that end, we conceive of pan-African feminist popular education as a critical learning approach by and with African people that takes as its starting point our histories of colonisation, imperialism, neo-liberalism, and other global systems of oppression, exploitation, and domination and aims to decode the hidden workings of power that produce gendered, racialised, and class inequities. It draws from pan-African and African feminist intellectual traditions with the aim of co-developing an emancipatory pan-African feminist consciousness which values pluriversality.

Conceptualising popular education

Popular education (PE) has a long history globally. While the terminology of popular education was hardly used, popular education practices go back to the early 18th century (Sarachild 1975). Despite evidence which points to practices and theorisations of popular education elsewhere, contemporary post-colonial accounts associate popular education with Latin America. Within Latin America, popular education or *educación popular* as it is known, was an attempt by post-independence liberal Latin American governments to expand primary education (Wiggins 2011). Paulo Freire, usually cited as a key figure in popular education, borrows from this long tradition of *educación popular.* He is credited with conceptualising and elaborating on what is today known as popular education. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), is the text that popularised and globalised popular education (Alexander 1990). In this seminal text, which underpins many popular education theorisations, Freire emphasises

conscientisation (*conscientizaçao*) and critiques the dominant "banking model" of education and advocates for "problem-posing education", where knowledge is co-constructed rather than imposed through teacher-to-student transmission. His ideas on popular education are carried through in his less-known anti-imperialist solidarity work and campaigns in Guinea Bissau between 1975 and 1980, where he exchanged ideas, practice, and pedagogy for popular education, for example in *Pedagogy in Progress* (Strong and Nafziger 2021; Frehiwot 2022). However, popular education practices predate Freire's work (Ferrer 2011; Wiggins 2011).

Before Freire's theorisation, popular education had long been practised in Africa. Some of the most prominent popular education initiatives are linked to the anti-colonial and liberation struggles. In these instances, popular education was used to conscientise people by social and political movements that fought for socio-economic emancipation and political independence. Aside from undocumented widespread practices of popular education, contemporary documented evidence of attempts to conceptualise popular education in Africa can be found in Julius Nyerere's article on "Education for Self-Reliance" (1968); in the philosophical works of Kwame Nkrumah, particularly his book, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization* (1970); and Sékou Touré's book *Revolution, Culture and Pan-Africanism* (1978) to mention a few. Among several key texts, these are some that champion ideas of political transformation of the individual and society through liberatory education. Similar ideas that foreground learning for liberation can also be found in the works of influential figures such as Ye Kake Yewerdewt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Charlotte Maxeke, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and many more contemporary pan-Africanists and African feminist thinkers.

Conceptions of popular education remain contested and contingent on material conditions, histories, and contexts (Kane 2005; Von Kotze and Cooper 2000, Wiggins 2011). However, it is commonly understood as an overtly ideological learning approach that develops critical consciousness among communities struggling for liberation, particularly those lacking social, political, and economic power because of oppressive and colonial histories (Kane 2005; Alexander 1990). It does this by unveiling and demystifying underlying contributors to the oppressive status quo and hegemonic social controls (Freire 1973; Manicom and Walters 2012). Popular education values people's experiences and histories and

uses these as foundational to its curriculum (Crowther et al. 2005). The focus is not on individual experiences but on collective experiences and their local and global connections (Sarachild 1975, 148). In popular education, therefore, pedagogy is collectivised (Crowther et al. 2005) and thus considered "less alienating" than formal education's banking model (Freire 1972; Alexander 1990). This experience-centred learning approach, which unites theory, practice, and activism, is seen as an effective way of catalysing grounded analysis and critique, empowering people with a language to articulate collective experiences of injustice, imagine ways to resist and dismantle structures and systems of domination, and build people's power (Alexander 1990, Wa Thiong'o 1985). It thus enables a move towards a critical perception of the world and its oppressive structures. In popular education, there is a shared understanding that critical awareness alone cannot bring about change; it must be accompanied by political action, leading to mobilisation and organising of people for their emancipation (Sarachild 1975; Freire 1972). Popular education is a learning that, thus, refines tools and grammars of liberation, transforms participants, and mobilises people for social change toward equity and justice (Von Kotze and Walter 2023; Benya and Yeni 2022).

In the popular education model, students are active interlocutors rather than empty vessels or docile listeners. Dialogue is fundamental as a method, a technique, a practice of sharing knowledge, and as a principle. The dialogue operates at multiple levels, between facilitators and students and between different ways of knowing. That means there is also a dialogue between embodied and disembodied indigenous and western knowledge frameworks and local languages (Wa Thiong'o 1985; Johnston 2005; Kane 2001). It is these deep dialogues that catalyse meaningful "epistemological relationships" rooted in epistemic justice (Macedo 2003), surfacing previously repressed, hidden, or unrecorded knowledges and histories of resistance, ways of being, radicalism, or alternative imaginaries (Crowther et al. 2005; Wiggins 2011, 46). It is this confluence of knowledges, experiences, and theories that produces new, counter-hegemonic knowledges and movement-relevant theories for emancipation (Sarachild 1975, 148; Johnston 2005; Bevington and Dixon 2005; Piven 2010).

While widely practised and theorised, popular education has faced significant criticisms. These criticisms address several key concerns: exaggerated claims

about its impact, frequent conflation with other participatory methodologies and techniques, persistently problematic yet unacknowledged power dynamics between students and educators, especially when they come from different classes, genders, or races, and the significant influence of funding sources on popular education initiatives (Von Kotze and Cooper 2000; Kane 2005; Manicom and Walters 2012).

Von Kotze, Walters and Luckett (2016) highlight the unresolved conceptual and practical tensions in popular education. They note a significant disjuncture between theoretical frameworks and actual practice. Another fundamental tension exists within social movements regarding the ultimate goal of popular education: whether it should prioritise individual or collective empowerment. This manifests as a conflict between social mobility, which prioritises individual advancement, and social transformation, which focuses on broader structural changes necessary for people's emancipation. Further complexities arise from popular education's ambiguous, and sometimes compromised, relationships with state actors and funders. Literature on social movements and gender training, which uses popular education techniques, notes the co-optation and depoliticising effect donor dependency has had on training and curriculum choices in popular education (Tsikata 2001; Choudry 2010). In several instances, according to Tsikata (2001) and Choudry (2010), this has diminished the critical edge or political legitimacy of some popular education/gender training work. They call this the "NGO-isation" of the movements and, in other instances, it is the bureaucratisation or professionalisation of feminist or gender work (Mama 1996; Tsikata 2001; Lewis 2002).

Other criticisms of popular education call attention to its claims about inclusivity and equity, but failures to implement these principles meaningfully. A significant critique centres on the treatment of different knowledge systems within popular education spaces. Despite rhetoric celebrating the valuing of diverse forms of knowledge, critics point out that certain knowledge systems continue to be privileged while others remain marginalised, revealing a persistent gap between popular education's stated principles and its actual practices (Benya and Yeni 2022).

The concept of "political" or "critical consciousness" within popular education is also contested by critics. Kane (2005, 33) notes that what constitutes

critical consciousness for some may represent "naïve consciousness" for others, suggesting that these concepts should not be treated as universal but understood within their specific temporal and spatial contexts. Mansfield (2005) reinforces this view, arguing that the very notion of critical consciousness is inherently contested and context dependent. While criticism abounds, Von Kotze et al. (2016), amongst many others, offer a compass to think through and about some of the critiques and tensions in popular education.

Critical to this paper and to understanding the emergence of feminist popular education are feminist critiques of traditional popular education approaches. The primary criticism addresses the gender-blind spots and masculinist foundations of popular education, which universalise men's experiences while failing to acknowledge the gendered nature of lived experiences. These feminist critiques ultimately led to the development of feminist popular education as a distinct approach. Before examining these feminist critiques in detail, it is essential to understand the historical practices of popular education in Africa dating back to the early 20th century. This historical examination serves two purposes: first, it substantiates our assertion that popular education was practised in Africa before Freire from the early 20th century; second, the periodisation allows us to trace the evolution and character of popular education. Through this historical lens, we can better understand the context of feminist critiques and their significance in reshaping popular education practices.

Periodising emancipatory and transformative pan-African popular education practices

In Africa, recent popular education practices can be traced to the early 20th century in political struggles for liberation (Lambais et al. 2023; Omolewa et al. 2023). In these struggles, popular education took on various names and forms and often moved beyond scripted projects or programmes explicitly entitled "popular education". It was often part of broader political activism, and was sometimes called people's education, education for liberation, liberation pedagogy, radical adult education, alternative education, political education, or workers' education (Alexander 1990; Walters and Manicom 1996; von Kotze 2005; Connolly 2005). Popular education is often seen as sharing similar roots

with "radical adult education", social education, or "critical pedagogy" (Wiggins 2011; Ferrer 2011). In other contexts, popular education seems to have been called "gender training" (for example, see Tsikata 2001; Acquaye-Baddoo and Tsikata 2001, definition of gender training). As Walters and Manicom (1996) argue, these terms reflect different political trajectories and trends of popular education in different places and periods. What is distinctive about popular education, however, is its emphasis not only on critique but also on political action towards social change. In other words, it not only attempts to "interpret the world, but also to change it" (Marx/Engels, *Selected Works*, cited by Ahmad et al. 2024, 16).

The evolution of popular education in Africa can be traced through four distinct yet interconnected historical periods; each characterised by unique struggles that shaped its character. Scholars such as Alexander (1990), Von Kotze (2005), and Wiggins (2011) have developed frameworks for understanding these distinctive phases and the same phases can be extrapolated from pan-African scholarship. The first phase during the colonial period, more specifically from the early 20th century to mid-1960s/1970s and including the segregation and apartheid era in South Africa and Namibia which ended in the early 1990s, was marked by what Von Kotze (2005, 11) terms "overtly oppositional" popular education. During this time, colonised nations across the continent directed their educational efforts against colonial regimes, empires, and native authorities who were in cahoots with colonialists. For countries that achieved independence later, this oppositional phase persisted until their liberation.

This oppositional phase can be seen in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa etc. from the early 20th century. In Nigeria, radical activism was championed at the local level by the peasantry, working people, political activists in communities, and by newspapers that were vehicles for labour movements and nationalists. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's Ladies Club Abeokuta (LCA), formed in 1932 in Nigeria, also engaged in versions of popular education and civic engagement. Ransome-Kuti provided political education to women and men in Abeokuta (Simola 1999). This club morphed into the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC) and incorporated working-class market women who were taught to read and were conscientised to confront the colonial apparatus and patriarchy directly. There are similar examples in Guinea Bissau, where the Partido Africano

para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) engaged in popular education through their militant schools.

As early as 1951 in Ghana, there was an adult education campaign aimed at adult literacy self-help projects and 'women's work' (Skinner 2011). Between 1958 and 1966, the African Affairs Committee (later Bureau of African Affairs) provided freedom fighters and liberation movements with ideological (and military) training (Grilli 2018). Activists used the press to link local protests to the independence movements (Alimi 2024) to disseminate popular education material. Newspapers such as the African Morning Post (founded in 1934) in the then Gold Coast, the West African Pilot (founded in 1937) and the Accra Evening News (founded in 1948) were among several newspapers founded by leaders of independence struggles to challenge colonisation and to raise the political consciousness of the citizens in West Africa. In Ghana, The Accra Evening News, Voice of Africa, Daily Graphic, and the Spark were used to educate Ghanaians politically around questions of independence, Pan-Africanism, and Socialism (Gadzekpo 2001; Poe 2004; Frehiwot 2015). These newspapers served as resources for Ghanaians to engage in political discussions and debates in formal and informal study groups such as the Ghana Young Pioneer Movement that had chapters across the country (Tettah 1999). In addition to print media, Nkrumah used what Fuller (2015, 34) identifies as "symbols of nationhood", "symbols of nationalism", or "symbolic nationalism", such as postage stamps and local currency, which were a central part of Nkrumah's nation-building project aimed at conscientising the Ghanaian public and the larger pan-African world. There was also the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute which contributed to popular political education through political knowledge production (Serra and Gerits 2019). Some of these initiatives continued in the early independence period.

In Southern Africa, popular education (PE) was popularised in the 1960s and 1970s through various initiatives, in some cases as part of the broader liberation, peasant, and workers' movements (Alexander 1990; Cooper 2007). In Mozambique, both during the anti-colonial war and post-colonial periods, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) emphasised popular political education and saw it as central in achieving success in the revolution and, ultimately, liberation and justice. Similar to other liberation movements

across the continent, it held schools for freedom fighters or "bush schools" to promote liberatory education and to involve them in nation building efforts (Machel 1970; Panzer 2009; O'Laughlin 2014). The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia and the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) in Zimbabwe also had similar popular or political education initiatives to conscientise, mobilise, and unite the masses across and beyond the country, in rural areas and in exile camps (Harber 1993; Essof 2013; Foley 1993).

South African workers and activists both inside and outside the country also engaged in oppositional popular education. As early as the 1920s, The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and liberation movements also relied on popular education to conscientise people (Johnson et al. 2023). Benson et al. (2024, 208) also point to "militant underground reading groups in Cape Town; education work in guerilla training camps in Tanzania" as other spaces where radical political education occurred. There was a "mushrooming" of popular education spaces after the 1976 Soweto student uprising and the 1985 "People's Education for People's Power" (Von Kotze et al. 2016, 96; Von Kotze 2005, 12). Around this period, education inevitably became radicalised, overtly politicised, and linked to the national struggle for liberation (Alexander 1990).

Across the continent, popular education initiatives also used print media, street law projects, and arts collectives such as "Theatre of Resistance" or "Theatre of the Oppressed" (Sitas 1998, 2020; Mda 2020; Moore 2010; Cooper 2024). In the liberation camps in Dar es Salaam in the early 1960s, there was *the Spearhead: The Pan-African Review* (Burton and Föger 2023), *Abyotawi Medrek* in Ethiopia, *The Namibian Review* in Namibia (Benson et al. 2024), *Révolution Africaine* in Algeria, and *Frank Talk* from the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) in South Africa (Ahmad, Benson and Morgenstern 2023). Black workers in South Africa from as early as the 1920s also had *Abantu Batho, Umteteli wa bantu,* later there was FOSATU's Worker News, *South African Labour Bulletin*, and *Izwelethu* (Erlank 2019; Nkoala 2022; Cooper 2024);, students had papers such as the *Black Review*, *SASO Newsletter* and community activists produced papers such as *Grassroots*, *Izwi lase Township*, *Izwi LaseRhini*, and *Ditshwantsho tsa Rhona* (Nieftagodien 2024). These print media and creative popular education initiatives were developed to conscientise people and

mobilise them for political action. These, and more, were "organising tools" that "nurtured" revolutionaries and were used to elaborate on revolutionary and emancipatory theories throughout this oppositional phase (Nieftagodien 2024, 105). In these movements and through these periodicals, activists learned class and black consciousness and experimented with radical ideas. Some of these popular education movements, while radical and cognisant of women's liberation and gender equality, did not seriously develop a feminist consciousness in the people.

The second phase emerged during the early post-independence period, where popular education shifted towards a more collaborative approach and was more supportive of newly formed governments (Von Kotze 2005, 11-12; Lewis 2002). During this period, movements worked in partnership with newly formed independent governments to envision alternatives and pursue decolonisation. During this phase "popular education was geared towards the large-scale popularising of state ideologies and preparing citizens for united nation-building" (Lewis 2002, 86). Tanzania is a point in case, as well as post-apartheid South Africa. In Tanzania, popular education or Education for Liberation was central to Julius Nyerere's development agenda (Nyerere 1976; Mushi 1991; Otunnu 2018). There was also adult education aimed at ensuring popular participation and greater support in attaining the nation's Socialist objectives. Mushi (1991) suggests that the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and Nyerere were engaged in Humanistic and Indigenous education. Like popular education, humanistic education developed a student-centred approach to adult education. The Tanzanian experience presents an important exception to the four-phase periodisation outlined above. Tanzania simultaneously hosted two distinct forms of popular education with different objectives. While the Tanzanian peasantry engaged in supportive popular education aligned with the government's objectives, in the liberation camps within Tanzania's borders a markedly different form of popular education which focused on ongoing liberation struggles across the continent was being practised. Tanzania's role as the host of the Organization of African Unity's Liberation Support Committee positioned it as a crucial centre for liberation movements, particularly from East and Southern Africa. The country provided training facilities where movement leaders conducted political education for freedom fighters (El-Khawas 1978; Saunders 2018).

This strand of popular education in the camps maintained an oppositional character, challenging not only the colonial governments in the fighters' countries of origin but also, occasionally, taking positions contrary to Mwalimu Nyerere's government. *The Spearhead* newsletter, edited by Frene Ginwala, exemplified this dynamic, serving as both a tool for popular education and a platform for opposition voices (Hassim 2023).

The third phase began with the implementation of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s. This period witnessed deteriorating relations between civil society and the old and new state governments that adopted International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural adjustment policies. These economic changes, which placed significant burdens on local populations, prompted a return to an oppositional stance. However, this opposition now targeted not only imperial powers but also global institutions and local political elites who were perceived as betraying national liberation objectives.

In other instances, during this third phase, popular education initiatives were also driven by those in power. For example, popular education was central to the success of Thomas Sankara's of Burkina Faso (1983-1987) and J.J. Rawlings's of Ghana revolutionary governments (Botchway and Traore 2023). Sankara sought to advance a sense of nationhood in the people of Burkina Faso while challenging external domination. This was executed through popular mobilisation of the people into self-help collectives to contribute to the development of the nation (Harsch 2013). The government launched adult education programmes to curb illiteracy and to engage in political education with the nation. The government under Sankara, the National Council of the Revolution, used television and radio programmes in "local" languages to promote political and national consciousness in the people of Burkina Faso for them to be active agents in their own development (Royer, cited by Louw 2022). The call for nationalism by Sankara was pan-African in scope as he linked Burkina Faso's revolution to the larger pan-African movement. Sankara also incorporated women's advancement in this campaign of liberatory education for the people of the nation. The role of women in society was transformed through structures of the government but also discussed as significant through different modes of liberatory education such as his political orientation speech (Harsch 2013).

In Ghana, the coup d'etat regime of J.J. Rawlings, a contemporary and close comrade of Thomas Sankara, in its early years promoted people's power and liberation through the creation of People's Defence Committees (PDCs) in communities at the district and regional levels. There was also Workers' Defence Committees (WDCs) aimed at empowering Ghanaians to contribute to national development through popular participation (Agyeman-Duah 1987). These committees were an attempt to break from the elite class control of the state and the political apparatus. These committees required members of the community to process or acquire a certain level of political consciousness for their effectiveness and thus popular political education was instituted. Although this period of conscientisation of the larger Ghanaian public did not last long, the spirit of liberatory politics through the development of people's democratic institutions must be noted as an example of liberatory education. By 1983, the nation was under the thumb of the IMF and had to develop a four-year Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) that derailed these efforts (Adedeji 2001).

Significant paradoxes and tensions mark the fourth and current phase of popular education. This period has witnessed intensifying pressures from global capital, with multinational corporations often wielding more power than nation-states over citizens' lives. On one side, there has been a deterioration in relationships between various social and political actors, characterised by deepening mistrust between state institutions, political elites, civil society organisations, and citizens. In this context, popular education initiatives have been used in two ways: as a liberatory tool, or as a tool to promote conformity. Movements with radical roots maintain their oppositional stance as they pursue emancipatory futures. New movements and organisations have also emerged in recent years to push a radical agenda of popular education. On another side, attempts by funders, state actors, and liberal institutions have tended to depoliticise popular education through various mechanisms, including formalisation efforts. This has created a complex dynamic where popular education simultaneously maintains its historical role as a tool for social transformation while facing significant pressures to moderate its radical objectives and be reformist. These competing forces have fundamentally shaped contemporary practices and trends of popular education. For radical popular education initiatives, opposition to power and oppressive systems, such as capitalism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism, has

remained a consistent focus (Mama 1996; Von Kotze et al. 2016). We return to this point in the last section on contemporary feminist popular education initiatives. To conclude here, from a feminist perspective, each historical phase and its accompanying economic and political contexts presented distinct challenges for women, necessitating the emergence of a distinct feminist popular education. We will explore the development of feminist popular education in the continent and its core concerns in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Querying the popular education discourse and rethinking the archive: Feminist popular education as a practice of freedom

Feminist popular education emerged as a radical practice of liberation in response to critiques of popular education that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. Influenced by the rise of feminism and black and African feminists, alongside the development of the women's movements in some parts of the continent, feminist popular education scholars and practitioners challenged the systemic erasure of women's experiences in popular educational discourses. Their critiques exposed how popular education discourses neglected gender, women's and feminist issues, operating under a gender-neutral posture. As Walters (1991, 21) argued, "popular education failed to recognise the gender contradictions both theoretically and methodologically. Popular education by broadly targeting 'the oppressed and exploited' did not address the specificity of women's oppression." Feminists challenged not only the marginality of women's issues in the discourse but also the narrow conceptions of what constitutes "the political" within popular education (Mansfield 2005), which typically focused on large movements rather than small initiatives. This restricted framing of "the political" had significant consequences for both popular education discourse and archival practices. In discourse, it led to the depoliticisation of women's personal experiences, while in archives, women's personal political experiences went unrecorded as political actions.

Feminists responded by asserting that the personal is fundamentally political and that popular education must take women's experiences seriously through an expansive conception of the political. They argued for including women's personal experiences and struggles, which were products of systemic

oppressive structures, as falling within the scope of "the political." By revaluing these personal experiences as critical starting points in popular education and as foundations for theorising and imagining liberatory alternatives, feminists worked to dismantle androcentric norms and masculinist conceptions of "the political" within popular education discourses.

This recalibration and reclaiming of what constitutes the political has revealed a broader landscape of women's popular education initiatives that were previously uncategorised as such, particularly informal education focused on personal political matters. Through this reconceptualisation of "the political", we can now recognise that women's popular education has long existed, albeit in small, ad hoc forms that may have appeared disconnected from larger, more explicitly political movements. This recalibration has also meant that instead of dismissing women's issues as apolitical or as simply "community development", welfare, charitable, or awareness programmes, their political significance and disruptive power has been reclaimed. Broadening conceptualisations to accommodate the eclectic nature of women's popular education initiatives, therefore, not only makes the initiatives visible, but reduces mischaracterisation of women's popular education initiatives and reclaims women's actions as political and emancipatory and seen as part of fighting oppressive systems and structures.

Other feminist critiques of popular education discourse addressed the issue of the imagined "political subject" who was presented in discourse as gender neutral, but in practice was a man**.** Drawing from the revolutionary ideas of leaders like Cabral and Nkrumah around the "woman question", feminists demanded intentionally including women as legitimate political subjects with agency. These critiques amplified and deepened other important challenges that had already emerged within the pan-African feminist movement regarding the imagined rational political subject. The "rationalist masculinist" frameworks underlying popular education theorisation and practices were thus queried. Feminists argued that such "rationalist" frameworks privilege reason while positioning it in opposition to emotion and spirituality, and ultimately to women. These frameworks also reduced the body, something feminists in their popular education practices took seriously, to a mere prop while feminists argued it was both a site of struggle and a source of knowledge (Nadeau 1996).

Another feminist critique of traditional popular education can be gleaned from the non-careful analysis of patriarchy. Feminists thus raise the need within popular education to recognise patriarchy, alongside capitalism and racism, as another oppressive system that must be obliterated. Feminists who made these critiques wanted to draw attention to gender-specific struggles and to the fact that even oppressed men could simultaneously be oppressors and beneficiaries of the patriarchal system from which women needed liberation too (Mansfield 2005). Feminists also highlighted the multiple sites, including the private domestic sphere, at which women's oppression occurred. By insisting on taking patriarchy seriously and seeing the domestic space as a political site, in popular education discourse feminists wanted to affirm the multiple and interlocking ways in which women's lives were constrained not solely by capitalism and colonialism but, equally, by patriarchy.

Including patriarchy and expanding the sites of struggle to include the family, the domestic, and the kitchen table, allowed popular education discourse to link experiences of food scarcity, health, etc. to global economic pressures and capitalism, as opposed to personal failures by women. Drawing out these connections enabled popular education discourses to transcend the boundaries between personal and political, private and public, thereby reimagining popular education's conventional frameworks. At these kitchen tables, women were not "just talking" but getting conscientised and learning to link personal struggles to systems and structures. Like the church and community hall, homes and kitchen tables were critical politicising popular education spaces that fostered dialogues that helped women respond to their immediate needs while developing a collective and feminist consciousness and imagining alternatives to the capitalist and patriarchal status quo (Smith 1989).

As feminists examined the popular education discourse and archive, they articulated the need for a distinctly feminist approach to and theorisation of popular education. This approach would centre women's experiences, recognise the diverse ways they engage in learning for emancipation, prioritise their liberation, and acknowledge them as active political agents rather than passive or absent participants (Nadeau 1996; Manicom and Walters 2012; Walters and Von Kotze 2021). Following these critiques, significant work has been undertaken to transform the popular education discourse and expand its conceptualisation

to address feminist concerns within traditional popular education practices and theorisation.

A feminist conception of popular education

In response to these critiques, feminist popular education scholars began developing approaches that integrated feminist analysis with popular education, systematically infusing gender and feminist consciousness into existing practices (Walters 1991, 21). This allowed for a discursive reclamation of the political edge of seemingly mundane popular education initiatives and spaces, as well as a rejection of androcentric discourses that marginalised or erased women. Women were thus inserted more forcefully as active agents of conscientisation, political action, and social change in popular education discourses and practices.

This avowedly feminist intellectual intervention in popular education produced two seminal texts that explicitly use "popular education", both edited by Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom: *Gender in Popular Education: Methods for Empowerment* (1996) and *Feminist Popular Education in Transnational Debates: Building Pedagogies of Possibility* (2012). These volumes sought to incorporate gender and feminism into popular education discourse, addressing previous gender-blind spots by amplifying diverse global feminist voices and practices. The volumes attend to several themes such as different practices of consciousness-raising, the centrality of the body in women's ways of making sense of struggles, developing a gender and feminist consciousness, and curriculum and solidarity across class and race. In these volumes, feminist popular educators advocate for a more integrative approach to popular education, one that mobilises physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions in the pursuit of emancipation.

Around the same time as the publications mentioned above, literature emerged from across the continent centring African women's experiences of conscientisation and broad-based learning to address gender inequities at various scales. While this literature does not necessarily use the term "popular education" and employs the term "gender training", it has similar objectives and documents practices similar to popular education (Lewis 2002; Benson 2018). A critical example is Tsikata's (2001) edited volume, *Gender Training in Ghana: Politics, Issues and Tools*. This authoritative text, examining the politics and practices of

gender training in Ghana, emerged from a collaboration between the University of Ghana and the Third World Network (TWN), a non-profit policy research and advocacy organisation. When analysed through a popular education lens, this work provides grounded examples of feminist or gender popular education in various settings.

Additional publications on feminist popular education practices in Africa using similar terminology to "gender training" are available, but some are difficult to access and are often hidden in organisational archives. These include archives from AAWORD in Nigeria, NetRight in Ghana, the Africa Gender Institute (AGI) and Gender Education Training Network (GETNET) in South Africa, and Emang Basadi Women's Association (EBA) in Botswana. Programmes or/and practices within these movements/organisations, among many others, reveal diverse approaches to feminist or gender popular education in Africa (Lewis 2002; Tsikata 2001; Benson and Davis 2015; Benson 2018). They reveal practices of popular education that span from more radical feminist popular education and gender training and education to ecofeminist and socialist feminist popular education (Mama 1996; Lewis 2002; Benson 2018; Manicom and Walters 2012; Von Kotze and Walters 2023).

To date, more work has been done to conceptualise feminist popular education in Africa. For Walters and Manicom (1996, 7, 2) feminist popular education is a "participatory, democratic, non-hierarchical pedagogy" that "is oriented towards transforming gendered power relations and shares the basic methodological principle of valorising and building analytically and practically upon the experiential knowledge of learners themselves". This definition resonates with that of "gender training" by Acquaye-Baddoo and Tsikata (2001). They expand on the concept above by explicitly connecting learning to action and social change. Acquaye-Baddoo and Tsikata (2001) define "gender training" as "a range of (learning) activities which seek to inform, raise consciousness and equip different categories of persons with the skills to enable them to address gender inequalities in their work, their lives and in society at large". Both definitions foreground learning and conscientisation that leads to political action towards a more gender just society. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's more recent definition adds important dimensions of resistance and power analysis. She provides a comprehensive conceptual framework, defining feminist popular

education as an innovative pedagogical lens that enables "analysis and enactment of personal, cultural, and political resistance to inherited patriarchal and misogynist practices." She characterised it as a transformative practice designed to "speak truth to power" and pursue gender justice (Mohanty 2012, viii, cited by Von Kotze and Walters 2023, 23).

Combining these definitions gives us a more expansive conception of feminist popular education, one which enables us critically to re-examine women/gender or feminist popular education archives, illuminate narratives, and experiences systematically obscured and depoliticised as "general education" rather than recognised as popular education for women's liberation. Rather than top-down knowledge transmission, it emphasises collective learning and action and recognises and builds upon women's experiential knowledge. What is of significance about these definitions are the ways in which they all foreground the pedagogical and political aspects of feminist popular education (Walters 1996). In these instances, the learning process itself becomes a form of resistance, while it simultaneously builds capacity that drives social change.

Viewing these conceptions through a pan-African feminist lens opens new possibilities and is an opportunity to ground feminist education in the lived realities of African women's experiences and struggles. We thus see them as an invitation to think about what a pan-African feminist popular education could look like and foreground resistance not only to patriarchy but also to neo-colonial and imperial structures and systems that continue to shape unequal gender relations across the continent making them seem insurmountable.

In response to this invitation, we offer a definition of pan-African feminist popular education. We conceive of it as a critical learning approach by and with African people that takes as its starting point our histories of colonisation, imperialism, neo-liberalism, and other global systems of oppression, exploitation, and domination and aims to decode the hidden workings of power that produce gendered, racialised, and class inequities. It advances the interests of the oppressed through political action, social change, and emancipation. We offer the following principles to elaborate further:

- Pan-African feminist popular education is intersectional, challenges hierarchies, and values African women's knowledge, creativity, and

their local or indigenous knowledge resources and sees them as critical pedagogically in developing locally grounded, but outward looking progressive liberatory grammars.

- It draws from and seriously regards pan-African and African feminist intellectual traditions and thinkers who have been marginalised in mainstream canons of emancipation and radicalism.
- Pan-African feminist popular education is dignifying and humanising education that aims to develop an emancipatory pan-African feminist consciousness which values pluriversality.
- It fosters deep solidarity with others, especially the formerly colonised in the global South, while grounded in African realities.

Inserting African women into the popular education archive

With that broad conception of popular education, political actors, and action, we argue that Africa women's popular education initiatives have a long history. Movements and informal formations that have carried out popular education targeting women can be traced back to the early 1900s. Some of these formations were not necessarily feminist but had what Mama (1996, 5) calls "feminist elements". When examining African feminist literature on education initiatives targeting African women, we can trace an evolution in how these educational programmes have been characterised.

- The early literature broadly discussed "women's (popular) education";
- With the rise of women in development approaches, the discourse shifted to "gender (popular) education and training"; and
- In the past two decades, there has been explicit recognition of "feminist popular education".

In examining literature across these three strands, two key insights emerge. First, these educational initiatives often embodied the principles of popular education as defined above, extending beyond "training" to conscientise participants actively for political action. Thus, while their nomenclature may not explicitly reference popular education, their fundamental character and methodology

aligned closely with popular education principles. Their approach to learning was inherently oriented toward consciousness-raising and mobilising participants to take action for social change. Secondly, we consider all these variations of popular education to be "feminist" popular education due to their shared focus on women's economic, social, and political emancipation and development. This inclusive categorisation is warranted because much of the popular education work before the 1980s, while not explicitly labelled as feminist, nonetheless pursued goals aligned with feminist principles. These initiatives consistently worked toward defending women's interests, demanding their rights, and articulating visions for women's liberation. Even when not using feminist terminology, these gender training and educational programmes aimed to transform gender relations and emancipate African women. This broader understanding allows us to recognise the underlying feminist characteristics of various forms of women's popular education initiatives, acknowledging their contributions to advancing women's rights and interests, regardless of their explicit labelling at the time. This is not to say all education initiatives targeting women were feminist popular education, but some certainly were.

Within these educational initiatives, one can identify a spectrum of feminist political orientations ranging from radical to progressive to conservative and reactionary approaches. The progressive elements were notable in how these education initiatives positioned women as political actors during periods when such recognition was rare. They broke new ground by centring women's experiences and recognising that their distinct circumstances warranted specific attention, affirming women as subjects capable and deserving of political emancipation. Take as an example the popular education work done by Aïcha Chenna with the Association Solidarite Feminine (ASF) in Morocco where they worked with stigmatised and excluded women who were single mothers, some abused. The political and radical aspects of their popular education work have often been reduced to welfare, downplaying the political component of advocating for women's independence. While they do not specifically use the term patriarchy, the focus on gender-based violence presupposes it. Also, consider Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's educational work with Nigerian market women in the 1940s and the tax revolt she led in 1947. The above are examples of radical and progressive women's popular education initiatives that empowered, mobilised, and raised

critical consciousness, as well as radicalising market women (Omtoso and Olaniyi 2023; see also Tukur's paper in this issue). Such initiatives were often driven by women for women and took place in progressive and independent local or community women's informal formations or movements, or labour and social movements (Seidman 1993; see Lazreg 1994 on Algeria; Hassim 2002 on South Africa). There are also examples from Egypt that were more national in scale and were explicitly feminist going back to the early 1900s. In Mama's (1996) study, she mentions the Egyptian Feminist Union operating within the nationalist movement in the 1920s. This union was producing its own magazine (*L'Egyptienne*, founded in 1925), which contributed to women's conscientisation. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, particularly its "Community Empowerment and Education (CEE)" seminars, focused on environmental conservation and women's empowerment, cultivating environmentally conscious women activists (Maathai 2003). In Botswana, the Emang Basadi Women's Association (EBA) was started in 1986 "to lobby against laws that discriminated against women" (Selolwane 2004, 1). It had a legal education programme that aimed to conscientise and politicise women. The focus of EBA was to demystify the law and teach women about the ways in which it discriminated against women. EBA also engaged in voter education programmes, campaigns, and workshops and developed political literature and development manuals as part of their popular education conscentisation work. They mobilised women to make demands to protect their rights and engage actively in party politics. To conscientise women at a mass scale, EBA engaged in "educating female voters and mobilising them" and developed a powerful women's manifesto (Selolwane 2004, 2).

Ethiopian rural women, concerned with their political exclusion, created grassroots popular education spaces like *wenfel* (work associations/agricultural labour share groups) where they engaged in collective learning, teaching each other cotton processing and spinning (Berhane-Selassie 2018). The *wenfels* also served an emancipatory role, particularly in socio-economic terms. Women farmers also established cooperatives that facilitated knowledge exchange through popular education approaches, raising awareness about legal solutions to discriminatory statutory and customary laws regarding land rights (Berhane-Selassie 2021, 1383). More recently, organisations like the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), founded in 1995, has continued this tradition of popular

education through their "public education" initiatives. EWLA's work focuses on collective awareness-raising and popular education about violence against women, land rights, and economic rights (Burgess 2013).

Akin to the emancipatory role of Ethiopian women's groups, Takayanagi's research on Maasai women in Kenya illuminates how informal learning spaces emerged historically and in the current era in response to women's intersecting experiences of gendered, ethnic, and economic marginalisation within traditional patriarchal contexts. These spaces were, and continue to be, fundamentally radical in nature, empowering women to challenge systemic oppressions. As Takayanagi notes, Maasai women "became active agents of social change through informal learning" (2017, 54). Many of these initiatives in Tanzania were integrated into the broader Ujamaa development project driven by Nyerere (Hall et al. 2022; Peeples 2019; Takayanagi 2017; Sanya and Lutomia 2015).

In West Africa, popular education has been central to women's work in the pan-African movement. Radical feminist activist organisations contributed to raising the collective consciousness of the larger population and challenging patriarchal ideas prevalent in the pan-African Movement. They played a dual role, one that contributed to the overall objectives of the pan-African movement, and the other addressing the systematic exclusion of women from the national project. In Senegal, radical feminist organisations, such as *Yewwu-Yewwi* for the Liberation of Women, founded in 1984, used liberatory education to advocate for the liberation of women, the transformation of society, and to shift popular political consciousness in relation to women's contributions and role in society (Dieng 2024). *Yewwu-Yewwi*'s objectives included raising awareness and reinforcing women's participation in politics, struggling against all forms of oppression. They held popular education activities such as seminars, roundtables, and training sessions (Kane and Kane 2018). The *AWA*: *la revue de la femme noire,* published between 1964-1973, also engaged in popular education around questions of pan-African feminist activism (Dieng and Sall 2023). In Nigeria, Pereira (2004) highlights different women's organisations and movements that focused on women and had an education and activism component, for example, the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) formed in 1977 and the Women in Nigeria (WIN) founded in 1982.

In Southern Africa, popular education focusing on women and women's issues took place within liberation and labour movements (Chigudu 1997; 2002; Hassim 2002; 2003; 2006; Chigudu 2007; Chigudu and Chigudu 2015; Hassim 2015; Orr 2021). There were also activities within women's church unions that afforded women with opportunities not only for socialising, and self-expression, but also for conscientisation and empowerment (Gaitskell 1999). In other words, these women's religious unions were sites of political education, conscientisation, and mobilisation. These learning initiatives emerged in response to African women's experiences and needs, and they inspired resistance to the patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems. Some of these initiatives did not always explicitly name the broader oppressive systems or highlight the "feminist political" character of initiatives, but they were radical and, in their framing of education programmes, they emphasised women's experiences and struggles. They also had emancipatory goals. In Zimbabwe, Essof (2013) documents various women's organisations that engaged in political mobilisation and popular education, especially following the 1983 Operation Clean-Up raids which targeted and abused women. She notes that these organisations represented diverse political orientations and took feminist/gender popular education seriously. She argues that "some of these organisations were overtly feminist in orientation, others more conservative and mainstream in their approaches. Nonetheless, in the 1990s, they all played a role in re-defining the private and public sphere, demanding full rights for women as citizens of the state" (Essof 2013, 37-38). They included the Women's Action Group and the Women and Law in the Southern Africa Research and Education Trust.

While the examples we cite above were progressive, other women's popular education initiatives took a moderate stance, particularly in their approach to naming systems of oppression. While they readily identified and critiqued capitalism and colonialism as sources of women's oppression, they often stopped short of explicitly naming patriarchy as a fundamental system of domination. This selective critique reflected the complex political landscape these initiatives faced, demonstrating both their transformative potential and their limitations in challenging all forms of systemic oppression. The women's movements in Algeria, both before and during the war from 1954 to 1962 and through the independence period, exemplify this pattern (Lazreg 1994). Lazreg (1994)

documents this tendency in her analysis of several organisations: the Muslim Women's Association founded in 1947, women revolutionaries in the Front for National Liberation (FLN), and the religious reform movement of the Ulema. Similarly, in Angola, the Organisation of Angolan Women (OMA) followed this approach. Though OMA played an integral role in the liberation struggle, post-independence reconstruction, and literacy teaching using popular education methodologies, in some instances, it too stopped short of directly naming patriarchal structures (Holness 1984).

Other initiatives were entirely captured politically, and their women's popular education primarily served to amass political support and legitimacy for political parties rather than pursuing revolutionary goals for women's emancipation (Mama 1996; Lewis 2002). In various countries, political parties drove these popular education initiatives, emphasising mobilisation of support and consolidation of power for ruling regimes rather than women's liberation. Examples of such politically captured feminist/gender popular education initiatives can be found across Africa (Mama 1995; see Abdullah 1993 on Nigeria; Nzomo 1993 on Kenya; Tsikata 1989, Manuh 1993 on Ghana; Eresso 2021 on Ethiopia; Lazreg 1990, 1994 on Algeria; and Hassim 1991, 2015 on South Africa). The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA), established in 1980, exemplifies this dynamic. While REWA mobilised women in the post-revolution period, instead of championing women's or feminist popular education goals in organised learning spaces (Berhane-Selassie 1997), it became a women's propaganda machine for the Derg regime, failing to advance women's conscientisation (Eresso 2021, 7). Though conservative in many respects, some of these initiatives still advanced liberal feminist politics. While examples like REWA emphasised support for ruling regimes, other liberal feminist popular education initiatives were driven by funders whose conditionalities undermined the radical potential of feminist popular education through welfare-emphasising approaches. These strands of popular education served political party or funder interests rather than specifically, and holistically, women's liberation. In essence, they represented a form of feminist political education that targeted women, conscientised them in terms of class, colonisation, and nationalist politics, but did this without raising a critical gender or feminist consciousness. Feminist,

gender, or women's popular education initiatives, therefore, have taken different approaches to feminist popular education. By "approaches" we borrow from Tsikata (2001, 4), who defines it as "the underlying understanding of gender issues which guides particular frameworks, gender and development policies and other actions". The approaches range from "welfare, or equity, anti-poverty, empowerment" (Tsikata 2001) alongside their conscientising focus.

Contemporary examples of feminist popular education initiatives are as numerous as their historical predecessors. They span the political spectrum from radical and progressive to liberal, conservative, and reactionary approaches. While building upon historical examples, we argue that these contemporary initiatives warrant particular attention for their new radical demands concerning women's emancipation. In Ghana, several women's organisations advance feminist popular education, including the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) and ABANTU for Development (Mama et al. 2005; Britwum 2017; Tsikata 2007). These organisations conduct public forums on key issues affecting women, provide leadership training, and support movement building. NETRIGHT, for instance, holds capacity building sessions for young women and community members, as well as a National Feminist Forum. More recent feminist popular education initiatives have emerged online, such as #PepperDemMinistries and Drama Queens (Odoi and Baidoo 2024). In Senegal, the Association of Women Lawyers (AJS) advocates for women's rights through legal advice, reform of discriminatory laws, and popular education focused on law and women's rights (Scales-Trent 2010). These activities, both political and academic in nature, have contributed significantly to raising Senegalese women's political consciousness.

South African women's movements and local feminist organisations have similarly relied on feminist popular education to advance various liberatory agendas. For example, in the wake of the Marikana massacre, feminist organisations initiated different popular education programmes (Fakier and Cock 2018; Benya and Yeni 2022). Other initiatives have addressed housing, water struggles, land and livelihood issues, as well as other issues directly related to women's gender roles (Ismail 2009; Benson 2016; 2018; 2020; Andrews 2018; Andrews 2019) Across the continent, WOMIN has advanced popular feminist education in response to extractivism and its impact on women (Hargreaves et al. 2025; Hargreaves 2023). Environmental struggles have emerged as an

increasingly urgent priority in recent years, with popular education initiatives incorporating these concerns more prominently into their work (Walters and Von Kotze 2021; Von Kotze and Walters 2023)

Other shifts that can be noted in the contemporary feminist popular education initiatives is the use of multimodal platforms, including virtual spaces, to drive feminist conscientisation efforts, thus enabling "local" movements to become "global", i.e. connecting struggles, activists, and political action across spaces. Take for example, the #RhodesMustFall, including the women's wing of #TotalShutDown, which used social media for educating and conscientising people (Ramaru 2017; Benya 2018). Some of the contemporary popular education initiatives by movements have relied on social media to grow their base and, most importantly, to conscientise people. Some have held Twitter townhalls, Facebook live debates, and teach-in sessions to share political education material (Bosch 2016; Sebeelo 2021). The use of social media as a new platform for popular education and learning and constructive debates has globalised movements and their popular education efforts and expanded the audience. Similar examples can be found in the #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #BlackLivesMatters, #EndGalamsey, and support for Marikana Workers.

Conclusion

In recuperating the histories of pan-African feminist popular education, we illuminate the significant contributions of African women as longstanding architects of transformative educational practices. These women challenged oppressive systems through innovative, locally rooted, and emancipatory pedagogical strategies. By documenting these historically overlooked initiatives, we contest dominant narratives that have systematically erased African women's role in advancing pan-African feminist popular education and their legacy of resistance through educational practice.

By naming and documenting these initiatives, we contribute to collective archiving efforts that highlight pan-African feminist popular education as a means of cultivating emancipatory futures. These archival efforts align with the broader epistemic justice work that African feminists have undertaken across various spaces. This work of archiving serves both academic and political purposes,

representing another form of resistance that testifies to African women's collective imagination and political engagement.

Understanding past practices and initiatives of pan-African feminist popular education requires a comprehensive historical analysis that extends beyond explicitly feminist-labelled initiatives. By broadening our analytical frame, we can recognise and honour the numerous undocumented popular education initiatives in grassroots movements led by African women that embodied feminist principles in practice, even when not formally designated as such. As we envision the future of pan-African feminist popular education, we must build upon the critical curriculum content that contemporary practices emphasise while acknowledging the increasing significance of digital spaces. The proliferation of right-wing ideologies and governments and competing political narratives across social media platforms demand our strategic engagement with these digital channels. These platforms have become essential for disseminating ideas, preserving our practices through documentation, and cultivating global alliances and solidarity networks.

The future and success of pan-African feminist popular education initiatives will depend on our ability to navigate both traditional and digital spaces effectively, ensuring our continued advancement of both historical and emerging struggles. This integrated approach will be crucial for sustaining and expanding the impact of our movements in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Feminist Pan-Africanism and NEPU Women's Education in Northern Nigeria, 1951-1979

Mubarak Tukur

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) Women's Wing's popular education campaigns in Northern Nigeria from 1951 to 1979. The formation of NEPU in 1951 was a watershed moment in the history of feminist struggle for education for women in Northern Nigeria. Before this moment, women in the region were denied education as most married early (New Nigeria Newspaper 1968). Gambo Sawaba, the leader of NEPU Women's Wing, advocated for the emancipation of women through education, going as far as appealing to the military government in 1968 to support a law that would compel parents to allow their girls to further their education at university level (New Nigerian Newspaper 1968). Long before this, in the 19th century, women such as Nana Asma'u were actively promoting popular education by moving from village to village teaching women the righteousness of religion. Nana Asma'u's movement, *Yan Taru*, set the foundation for the women's movement for education in Northern Nigeria. This study uses the Pan-African feminist popular education of NEPU Women's Wing as a case study to demonstrate resistance to the exclusion of women in public space through feminist popular education in Northern Nigeria. The paper centers on Gambo Sawaba as pivotal to the women's mass literacy movement from a Pan-African context between 1957-1979 and is anchored in primary source data including archival materials and interviews. Meanwhile, 1979 was significant because it was the period during which the new constitution provided women's right to political participation in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: NEPU, women, emancipation, feminism, and Pan-African education

Introduction

The 1950s witnessed the most phenomenal expansion of education in Nigerian history. With the regionalisation of education in 1951 and the rise of the three major political parties in each of the three regions of Nigeria, both Western and Eastern regions prioritised education. They also increased women's enrolment in education and provided it free, especially in the Western region where it was facilitated by the Premier, Chief Awolowo (Fafunwa 2004). In the Northern region, which was home to the Northern People's Congress (NPC), there was a lower enrolment of women in education. In response, NEPU, classified as an opposition party, established a women's wing to support the education of women in the region. The NEPU Women's Wing, a group of local feminist grassroots women politicians, embarked on a massive Pan-African feminist mobilisation against the brutalities of both colonial and native authorities (Tukur 2024). Pan-African feminist popular education is a participatory approach to learning that involves critical examination of one's life, context and issues that are important to one. It is, in effect, a mechanism for developing strategies to build feminist movements. Feminist Pan-African popular education recognises the power dynamics of gender, race and sexuality, and how they can silence and exclude people.

The precolonial history of women's education in Northern Nigeria, in the Jihad period, suggests that women had the right to education and freedom of movement (Mahdi 2006). Women's education in Northern Nigeria had no limits as Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, the leader of the 19th-century Jihad in West Africa, established the famous Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria. Shehu Usman Dan Fodio's daughter Nana Asma'u engaged her intellectual and literary prowess to champion women's education in precolonial Northern Nigeria. The issue of freedom of movement for women included eligibility for formal education, as well as business education, though the emphasis then was on religious education (Mahdi 2006). During this period, there was a blend of secular and Islamic education programmes for women in rural and urban areas which Nana Asma'u promoted through her *Yan Taru* movement. The movement introduced fundamental learning and, in the process, taught women that "education was universally prescribed, not limited to "a few privileged women in certain Islamic

societies" (Mack 2023, 5)". The women's wing of NEPU continued the tradition of the *Yan Taru* and ensured that education for women in Northern Nigeria was liberating and transformative. Gambo Sawaba, an influential leader of the NEPU Women's Wing, promoted women's Pan-African feminist popular education in Northern Nigeria. The linkages between the United Nations International Agency (UNIA) and Northern Nigeria may not be obvious, but it is important to acknowledge that during this era, Cathryn McKenzie, an early Jamaican feminist and woman in the Garvey movement generally, indicated that "Historically, all over the Third World there has been a close connection between the anti-colonial and feminist movements" (Davies 2014). It was this awareness that prompted some NEPU women leaders, such as Azumi Miller, Malama Gambo Sawaba, Asabe Reza, Jummai Wul, Mairiga Sawaba, Ladi Shehu, Titin Bagobiri, Asabe Miller, Fati Misisi, Amina Aduke and Titin Jos, to form a formidable force of the women's wing (Danbatta 2010).

This article examines the role of the NEPU Women's Wing in promoting Pan-African feminist popular education in Northern Nigeria between 1951 and 1979. Focusing on Gambo Sawaba, the paper highlights how the NEPU Women's Wing was able to bring changes to the political leadership of both colonial and post-colonial Northern Nigeria. It demonstrates how, through this movement, hundreds of women were incorporated into the new mainstream of adult literacy, including those women who missed the opportunity to obtain education because of early marriage. This article is divided into several sections. The first section is an outline of the methodological and theoretical underpinnings in the study of Pan-Africanist popular education under NEPU and its women's wing and propaganda unit. The following section focuses on gender in pre- and post-colonial Northern Nigeria. The third section is a brief history of NEPU in the region. The fourth section continues to examine NEPU Women's Wing and its propaganda arm. The fifth section examines Pan-African feminist popular education under NEPU and its impact on women in the region. The final section is an overall discussion of the feminist tradition of popular education within Pan-Africanism in the late 19th and 20th centuries and concludes with a recommendation for greater south-south collaboration on issues of feminist Pan-African popular education in Africa. Please note that the names Gambo Sawaba and Sawaba will be interchangeably used in this article.

Methodological and Theoretical Underpinnings

The paper adopted a historical research design to historicise women's struggle through the activism of Gambo Sawaba and popular education under the NEPU Women's Wing. The study also undertook qualitative research in its extensive fieldwork between 2019 and 2024 in Northern Nigeria (Tukur 2024). Meanwhile, data from structured and unstructured interviews, life histories, and document analyses was collected from both oral and archival sources (Creswell and Creswell 2009).

Theoretically, this research utilised feminist theory to interrogate the impact of women's participation in liberation movements in Northern Nigeria (Annette 2006). Feminist theory supports the analysis of the contributions of Northern Nigerian women to the Pan-African feminist movement. This was carried out through unbundling the patriarchal dominance against which the theory of feminist participation advocates for the need for women's involvement in all aspects of decision-making to change the narratives of patriarchal dominance in Northern Nigeria (Annette 2006). The feminist participation theory informed the need for women to be fully involved in decision-making to change the narrative of patriarchal dominance. The philosophy of Feminist Pan-Africanism represents the historical, cultural, spiritual, scientific and philosophical legacies of the African sense-hood of patriotism. Feminism and Pan-Africanism in the 20th century came with definite approaches to challenging the entrenched system of racial and gender domination (Davies 2014). It is important to note that few women in Africa consistently created conjunctions, describing them as the coming together of different movements in particular historical moments (Davies 2014). A noteworthy event was the 1947 women's tax revolt in Abeokuta led by Funmilayo Ransome Kuti which was a clear example of feminist Pan-Africanism in the colonial period (Byfield 2021).

Gender in Pre- and Post-colonial Northern Nigeria

In pre-colonial Northern Nigeria, the Qur'anic system of education was the primary mode of education (Hoechner 2018). Women also attended those schools and generally studied until they were 12-14 years old, by which time they were

eligible for marriage. The landscape of Islamic education in the region changed with the introduction of Western education and the conquest of Northern Nigeria in 1903. Women, such as Gambo Sawaba, would later attend primary school but not complete their education. From the early 1950s, they championed the cause of women's liberation through activism. Sawaba was influenced by the ideas of Malam Aminu Kano in championing the cause of the oppressed masses (Gwadabe 2000). Northern Nigeria is composed of various ethnic groups with Hausa being the major one. It is strongly influenced by patriarchy and religion, which is a determinant factor in their lives and was a fundamental component of social relations in the precolonial period.

The precolonial education in Northern Nigeria was principally Islamic, especially in the Western and Eastern parts, as well as some parts of the central region. Meanwhile, some parts of the North Central area have a sizeable Christian population, especially in the Benue-Plateau and part of Southern Zaria as mentioned earlier. After the 19th century Jihad in West Africa, most of Northern Nigeria fell under the Islamic form of education (Abdurrahman 2012), although contact with Islam in the region had started much earlier, in the 15th century (Imam 2018). By the late 19th century, Islamic discourses became the defining identity and solidarity of the Caliphate. However, women in the region lacked any political office, power and formal authority even though most of them were not secluded (Imam 2018). The conquest of Northern Nigeria by the British resulted in a new impulse in which the Islamic cultural identity became a means of defiance of British rule. This trend continued from 1903 during which period the British colonialists ruled through the secular authority of indirect rule using Muslim rulers. This became the basis of Muslim power when political parties were established in the 1950s and they eventually took the leadership of the country at independence in the 1960s (Imam 2018).

The argument put forward by Imam (2018) is that during colonialism, the practice of seclusion increased among the population, but ironically also became a form of resistance to colonial rule. It is noteworthy that, in the political sphere at that time, NEPU was the only political party which advocated for the rights of women and included them in their manifesto (Imam 2018). The period from the late 1940s to the early 1950s was one of nationalist agitation in which the NEPU women, who, before the formation of the party, belonged to the group

of the *Talakawa* (common people) that had dismantled the notion of women's seclusion in the region. An example is the Sawaba battle with the ruling Native Authority under the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by the NEPU Women's Wing (Imam 2018).

Even though much of the early scholarship on women in Northern Nigeria documented and analysed the perceptions of masculinity in the region, by the early 1950s a virtual explosion occurred in research on women, and intense efforts began which led to a more widespread collection of data on both females and males in Northern Nigeria (Mahdi 2006). Based on this, the emergence of the NEPU Women's Wing in the history of feminist popular Pan-African education, anchored within the politics and politicking of Northern Nigeria, changed the masculine patriarchal dominance over women. This was because the wing embarked on massive liberation of women from male domineering and oppressive practices through extensive popular Pan-African education.

Brief History of NEPU

The piecemeal conquest of present-day Nigeria by Britain started in 1851. By 1861 Lagos had been acquired through military force and had become the first part of Nigeria to be formally colonised by a European power (Abba 2007). The immediate result of the colonisation of Nigeria was the establishment of a colonial economy and society. In the Northern region, in particular, this began with the establishment of the indirect rule through a native administration system; the introduction of a new system of taxation that demanded payment in cash; the restructuring of the economy to produce cash crops for the European market and the excessive use and misuse of power in the execution of these policies (Yakasai 2004).

The period between 1920-1940 was quite eventful in determining international politics and development. Beginning with colonisation, which, as far as Nigeria was concerned, took effect from about the 1880s, the 1920s marked the consolidation of colonial policies dominated by the prevalence of repressive policies, especially in Kano, administered by both the Colonial and the Native Authorities. Equally significant were the historic socialist revolution in Russia in 1917, the First and Second World Wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 and their

impact on the international community. Added to these was another Socialist revolution in China in 1949 and the mass penetration of their ideas into Eastern Europe, the decline of the capitalist West and the emergence of USA and USSR as the two superpowers of the world. The significance of these events further shaped the activities of NEPU towards becoming a socialist political party in Northern Nigeria, opposing the capitalist-oriented ruling NPC government. This is one of the reasons why most members of NEPU are drawn from the masses (poor) class of society.

Aminu Kano, the leader of NEPU, was born on August 8th 1920, to the family of Mallam Yusufu and Malama Rukaiya of the Gyanawa Fulani clan in the *Sudawa* quarters of Kano City (Feinstein 1998). Several years later, in 1933, Gambo Sawaba was born in Zaria to a Ghanaian father and a Nupe Nigerian mother. Her father, the late Isah Amartey, came to Nigeria in the early 1900s and settled in Sabon Gari of Zaria in Kaduna State, Northern Nigeria. Sawaba had little Western education before she was pulled out of school not because of lack of money but because, during a long vacation, she went to visit her father who was working at the Abdallah Company in Zamfara State and did not return to Zaria on time. On her return, she discovered that her place at school had been taken up by someone else. As a result, Sawaba was married off to a man who served in the army (Shawulu 1990). However, her marriage did not last long because of her involvement in politics. Nonetheless, Gambo remarried and had children. However, forces who were in the ruling NPC government continued to disturb her marriage by threatening her husband until the second marriage also failed. This was how Sawaba was impacted by patriarchy in Northern Nigeria.

NEPU was founded on the 8th of August 1951 with eight members who included Bello Ijumu, Abba Maikwaru, Mudi Sipikin, Magaji Danbatta, Baballiya Manaja, Musa Kaula, Abdulkadir Danjaji and Garba Bida with Mallam Sa'adu Zungur (Abba 2007). NEPU's manifesto focused on correcting the deplorable state of common people in the Northern region and its relationship with the activities of the British colonisers and local agents represented by the aristocracy controlling the Native Administration. The manifesto proposed that the only solution to this issue was for the people of the region to organise a political party to wrestle political power from the ruling class, both white and black (Abba 2007).

The main motive for the establishment of NEPU was to challenge the aristocratic oppression of the poor (*Talakawa)*. The oppressions were carried out by the Native Authority and the colonialists who supported the Northern People's Party's (NPC's) power to rule the area, while NEPU enjoyed the masses' support. NEPU became the main strong opposition in the region, as Sifawa (2017) states. NEPU's main objectives were to foster the spirit of mutual understanding, sympathy and cooperation amongst all elements of Northern Nigeria irrespective of sex, creed or language to:

- work selflessly and conscientiously towards the mental and spiritual emancipation of Northern people,
- educate the masses in these fields, and teach them the constitutional ways and approaches to change,
- be actively interested in everything, and neutral in nothing, that affects the destiny of the country, and cooperate with all organisations working with a pure motive towards redemption of land in Nigeria, provided their aspirations were, in the final analysis, not opposed to NEPU's own (Sifawa 2017).

NEPU continued agitating and defending the interests of the masses, as well as exposing their plight under the ruling NPC government. It also advocated for good governance and social justice in the sense that hundreds of thousands of NEPU members and supporters continued to languish in various prisons in Northern Nigeria from 1952-1966 (Sifawa 2017). Gambo Sawaba was among those NEPU members who happened to be regular detainees in both Kano and Zaria prisons. It has been reported that Sawaba was arrested and sent to prison more than 16 times while conducting and participating in the political activities of NEPU (Shawulu 1990).

NEPU stated the organisation's objectives in the Sawaba Declaration (Sifawa 2017). In the Declaration, NEPU committed itself to 1) the struggle for the redemption and emancipation of the masses in the Northern region from the tyranny and maladministration of the Sarakuna (Emirs) and their allies, the British Colonial Officers; 2) the progressive reform of the Native Authority system, what the party described as an unscrupulous and vicious system of administration by the family compact rulers in league with the British; 3) the

provision of social services to enable the masses to enjoy the fruit of their labour; so that poverty could give place to comfort, privilege to equality and political, social (including economic slavery) to freedom (Sifawa 2017).

Imam (2018) indicates that, from the onset, NEPU had a strong anti-feudal stance against the NPC government which was supported by the colonial administration. The colonial administration had such privileges as controlling the government with all the support from the *masu sarauta* (ruling emirs) in Northern Nigeria (Imam 2018). Meanwhile, NEPU heavily relied on the membership and support of independent artisans, small farmers and traders as well as some sections of society with visions of universal franchise in a secular democratic state (Imam 2018). Both NPC and NEPU contested in heated debate on the status and rights of women in Islam and how they should be applied in the contemporary society of Northern Nigeria. It was only NEPU which made it clear in its political manifesto that they endorsed and supported women's enfranchisement and rights of women to education in Northern Nigeria (Imam 2018). It was under this nomenclature of NEPU that Gambo Sawaba built her patriotic movement of feminist popular education in the NEPU Women's Wing.

From the outset, NEPU faced fundamental problems concerning the development of democracy in Nigeria in general, and Northern Nigeria in particular (Abba 2007). Foremost was the issue of democratic elections in the organs of government. NEPU challenged the undemocratic nature of the indirect elections introduced by the Macpherson Constitution, which was used by the colonial government to impose, in the name of elections, Native Authority notables in the legislative assemblies at the centre in Lagos and the region in Kaduna (Abba 2007). To strategise fully, NEPU opposition established a women's wing with a propaganda faction against the NPC Native Authority government. NEPU had been struggling with the Native Authority on the shrinking political space in the region. In this regard, on 20th October 1952, a letter signed by Gambo Sawaba requesting to hold a mass meeting at Tudun Wada (in Zaria, Kaduna state) was turned down (Gwadabe 2000). The meeting was to address two issues: the aims and objectives of the NEPU Women's Wing, as well as the causes of the oppression by the Native Authority (Shawulu 1990).

NEPU Women's Wing and its Propaganda Unit

The NEPU Women's Wing was founded in 1951 simultaneously with and as part of NEPU itself to draw people to the party (Yakasai 2021). NEPU attracted outspoken women like Azumi Miller, Asabe Reza, Jummai Wool, Titin Bagobiri and Titin Akawu among others to champion the cause of women in Northern Nigeria (Shawulu 1990). The NEPU Women's Wing was determined to agitate for women's participation in governance. They collaborated with women's wings of other political parties in Northern Nigeria. A case in point was the alliance between the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) (a regional political party of Eastern Nigeria led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first Nigerian President in 1960) and NEPU in the 1964 post-independence elections (Gwadabe 2020). This alliance supported NEPU's work of political education and mass literacy and actively championed the NEPU Women's Wing's promotion of women's rights.

Hajia Naja'atu Muhammed, one of the Second Republic's revolutionary politicians (1979-1983), described the life and times of Gambo Sawaba as the engine behind the women's movement in Northern Nigeria, especially under the NEPU Women's Wing. She said that the peacebuilding activism of Sawaba greatly helped the subsequent generation of women in the region to rise and resist other forms of violence. Despite the imprisonment, sexual abuse and all forms of dehumanisation that she suffered, Gambo Sawaba fought against all forms of injustice till the end of her life (Naja'atu Muhammed 2021). She further stressed how Sawaba embraced people of different backgrounds and became a neutral woman peacebuilder in her community.

Under Sawaba's leadership, the NEPU women provided mass popular education to hundreds of women. In fact, several members of the women's wing were introduced to NEPU and the work of the women's wing through the education campaign. Tanko Yakasai, a member of the women's wing, indicated that some women, like Ladi Shehu, benefitted from the mass education campaign and then became vigorously engaged in the NEPU Women's Wing (Yakasai 2021). The massive education of women in Northern Nigeria included teaching them skills, such as craft production in knitting and sewing, that allowed women

to become self-reliant and gain economic empowerment for their sustainability. Gambo revolutionised female participation in the region and was nicknamed '*Sawaba'* which means 'redeemer' for her tireless effort in fighting oppression and injustice for the masses (Shawulu 1990).

As stated earlier, Gambo's leadership of the NEPU Women's Wing earned her countless arrests and imprisonments. These sacrifices ultimately won women in Northern Nigeria the right to vote and run for elective positions, like their Southern Nigerian counterparts who had been so empowered much earlier. The effect of this revolution was that women came out to exercise their franchise at the first opportunity in 1979 when the country returned to democratic rule during the Second Republic (Yakasai 2021). In 1957, the colonial regime set up a commission to investigate the problems of minorities. During this inquiry, the NEPU women submitted a memorandum demanding the prioritisation of women's education in Northern Nigeria (Izuagie 2015). Specifically, they asked for a law for compulsory universal primary education, and to abolish the marriage of girls under 18 years. The persistent struggle by NEPU women registered success during the 1979 election (Gwadabe 2000). This was attributed to the struggle by women like Gambo Sawaba (together with) and others who supported the movement.

In 1954 NEPU established the School of Agitation and Propaganda in Kano to facilitate members, including the women's wing, to support its political education activities in fighting the NPC government. The NPC was the ruling party in Northern Nigeria under the premier of the region, Sardauna Ahmadu Bello who, apart from being the leader of the NPC, was also part of the Native Authority (Gwadabe 2000).

The policy of suppression of the NEPU opposition members continued despite the efforts of Mallam Aminu Kano in mobilising and raising the level of political awareness of the people. Daily, NEPU supporters found themselves imprisoned and charged in court on lame excuses (Andrew 2018). As a result, hardliners decided that it was important to celebrate this imprisonment by giving certificates to all members with such records. Between 1951-52 alone, over 31 members were awarded the Prison Graduates Certificate by NEPU. The number of "graduates" kept increasing as denial of freedom continued, as well as other forms of harassment and torture that the Native Authority visited

upon the NEPU opposition (Gwadabe 2000). Yet, they remained steadfast and unshaken in their conviction. Among them were Sabo Bakinzuwo, Tanko Yakasai, Uba Na Alkassim, Yahaya Sabo, Lawan Dambazau, Inuwa Nguru, Sambo Dandume, Abubakar Zukogi, Sharu Audu, Bala Keffi, Malam Gambo Sawaba, Malama Gambo Sawaba, Asabe Reza, Jummai Wul, Mairiga and Gambo Sawaba (Gwadabe 2000).

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education under NEPU

1951-1960 was a period of phenomenal self-determination and educational expansion in Northern Nigeria (Imam 2012). Education under the British educational policy underwent a series of transformations and changes as a result of education ordinances. Meanwhile, in 1979 there was a new constitution that distributed the educational burden among the three tiers of government, Federal, State and local government. But one landmark here was the achievement of Northern Nigeria women who won the right to vote and contest in an election for the first time in the history of Nigeria (Imam 2012). The feminist aspirations of Gambo Sawaba, which culminated in these victories, were sparked off when she attended a feminist school organised by Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in 1952.

Sawaba's feminist school was created and organised to concentrate on mentorship and critical thinking that targeted the dismantling of the different forms of power imbalances in Northern Nigeria (Gwadabe 2000). The school supported Sawaba as she began to challenge oppressive structures and systems that were opposed to the liberation of women. By 1958, NEPU and Gambo Sawaba advocated for the integration of the *Islamiyya*–type schools to offer mixed religious and secular teaching, especially for women. This system of schooling was consolidated, like Western education, using modern techniques like blackboards, tables, desks and the teaching of the English language. These institutions also studied advanced religious texts with a more "objective interpretation" (Gwadabe 2000). Sawaba vigorously campaigned for the education of women and even for street girls, which forced her to accommodate many women and young girls in her home. Thus, she built popular Pan-African feminist education in Northern Nigeria in the last decade of decolonisation.

The NEPU women constantly appealed to the Northern regional

government to open schools for girls; they submitted this request to the Willink Commission set up to address the problems of the minorities. They called for improved educational methods to correct the existing situation where children lost touch with their native culture and were left with nothing to replace it (Pereira 2005). They organised politically to fight for their rights by combining literacy classes with political education. Gambo Sawaba, as the leader of the women's wing, was known as a staunch supporter of women's rights and prominent in anti-colonial and anti-feudal protests. Her Secretary General in the NEPU Women's Wing, Ladi Shehu, was also a politically active woman. NEPU always argued that there was nothing Islamic in confining women to their homes or excluding them from politics (Pereira 2005). Through mass literacy, justice, freedom and democracy campaigns, NEPU advocated access to education for all women, including divorcees. They highlighted centrality of the impact of popular education on women so much so that they embarked on a mass literacy campaign at the grassroots level (Gwadabe 2000).

The collaboration between NEPU and NCNC displayed the vast experience of Gambo Sawaba in the way she connected her women's movement with Funmilayo Ransome Kuti in South Western Nigeria and the NCNC in South Eastern Nigeria (Shawulu 1990). A programme for bringing women to political participation was jointly organised by the NCNC and NEPU women during their political education meetings. Urban women were enjoined to form cooperatives to pool resources so that they could engage in certain trades while rural women were given political education along with literacy classes to help them succeed in fighting for their rights (Shawulu 1990). Sawaba conceptualised the relevance and importance of democracy for women's freedom which she used to address issues that would help to root their efforts directly in Pan-African feminisms.

The fact that Sawaba blended secular and Islamic education tailored to the needs of women as adult learners illustrates how the decentralisation of education became a key component of women's strategy. Mass literacy was seen as one of the main ways NEPU employed to educate women at all costs, irrespective of their age. Some of the NEPU women got their educational certification from formal educational settings and used that knowledge to sharpen the NEPU Women's Wing's Pan-African struggle (Adamu 1999). NEPU as a party delivered the material and other elements of Pan-African approaches to the women's wing

through the School of "Agitation and Propaganda." Sawaba used those reading materials in her radical methodology of reaching out to hundreds of women in rural and urban centres (Adamu 1999).

Sawaba led a local grassroots Pan-African feminist struggle for women's voter education and their rights in Northern Nigeria to fight the Native Authority in the region. Sawaba further said, "Women used every opportunity to appeal to the government to expand women's education" (New Nigeria Newspaper 1968). The work done by Sawaba and the women's wing helped in the reduction of the culture of child marriage in some parts of Northern Nigeria. At the time, this had become a handicap for the progress of girl child and women's education in some parts of the region. The struggle for popular education by the NEPU Women's Wing and their enduring spirit ultimately helped in winning some Assembly seats for the women in Northern Nigeria in the 1979 election.

Discussion

The emergence of women such as Gambo Sawaba was significant in the promotion of women's education through grassroots local radical political awareness. Sawaba and the women's wing of NEPU succeeded in dismantling the patriarchal and cultural hindrances in the region through mass mobilisations of women under the banner of NEPU between the 1950s and early 1960s. The British colonial authority noted that her stubbornness, defiance and fearlessness of authority often embarrassed the colonial administrators (Shawulu 1990). This description of Sawaba demonstrates her impact on the region and her ability to organise women as a formidable threat to colonialism and colonial authority. The NEPU Women's Wing and Sawaba engaged all women in the region focusing on those who needed the most support. The mass literacy campaign focused on women who had the most to lose, such as divorced women who were often denied an education because of the culture of early marriage (Hassana 2022). Focusing on these sectors of the population resulted in the women joining NEPU and the movement spreading across the various sectors of the population.

This article has brought the activities of Gambo Sawaba as a redeemer, as well as the leader of the NEPU Women's Wing, into sharp focus. It has demonstrated her struggle for a Pan-African popular education for NEPU

women members, as well as other women in Northern Nigeria. She fought both the colonialist and the local Native Authority under the NPC government to accommodate the women in their education policy. At independence in 1960, Gambo Sawaba could not see the freedom she had struggled for and went to prison for she did not hesitate to turn the fury of her acerbic tongue on the NPC government of post-independent Nigeria (Odumegwu-Ojukwu 1989). Sawaba sought and captured the hearts of underprivileged women who lacked the means to access education and only received it through the NEPU Women's Wing's mass literacy and education campaigns during her leadership (Shawulu 1990).

In all her life and efforts, Sawaba remained a mother to the motherless, a succour to the helpless, a beacon of hope to the oppressed and a thorn in the flesh of bumbling authority. According to Odumegwu-Ojukwu (1989, 171), "One might not often agree with her but cannot help admiring this woman who dominated her environment like she dominates all conversations." In this argument, Odumegwu-Ojukwu is eulogising the courage and steadfastness of Gambo Sawaba in bringing women to the front line of politics through her movement of popular education.

It is important at this juncture to stress that both Gambo Sawaba and the network of the NEPU Women's Wing contributed to the larger Pan-African and feminist movements in Northern Nigeria. This study, particularly on the NEPU Women's Wing, is significant in telling the history of Northern Nigeria's feminism and Pan-Africanism on the continent, and why it became so relevant to Pan-African feminist popular education.

The study further reveals that Gambo Sawaba, who all along had been a veritable revolutionary within herself, was part of the NEPU Women's Wing's struggle in Northern Nigeria. The British colonial authority noted her stubbornness and fearlessness in her anti-colonial defiance to authority which often embarrassed the colonial administrators. She preferred to maintain the mask of gallantry in her confrontation with the colonialists in destroying their mission and image in Northern Nigeria (Odumegwu-Ojukwu 1989). She could never be bought because she was never up for sale. Sawaba demonstrated all the ruse and cunning of Alhaji Sabo Bakin-Zuwo (who was the then Governor of Kano state) (Odumegwu-Ojukwu 1989).

One of the founding members of NEPU, who joined the party in 1951, Tanko Yakasai said that "women under the leadership of Gambo Sawaba played the role of convincing their fellow women regarding freedom, democracy and the need to struggle for women to acquire the franchise" (Yakasai 2021). She also organised women's congresses which mostly castigated the ruling class. Thus, the ruling class used security agents at their disposal to arrest and imprison her several times (Yakasai 2021).

With all this, one cannot help but marvel at how Gambo Sawaba, who was not able to complete her primary school, recognised social injustice, and was so convicted about the need to fight it that she embarked on mobilising women to attend Western education just so that more women would be enfranchised and enabled to stand for elective offices. Hitherto, this had not been allowed in Northern Nigeria. Gambo Sawaba's popular political activism at an early age so sharpened her desire for women to attain their rights that she started urging parents to allow their girls to further their education beyond secondary school. Sawaba's struggle was both Pan-African as well as feminist popular education (New Nigeria News Paper 1968).

Gambo Sawaba's grassroots mobilisation in entrenching local feminism, that was birthed by her radical political movements combined with Pan-African struggles against the colonial domination of Northern Nigeria, should receive highest commendation. Simultaneously, she drummed up support for women's popular education when she led the NEPU Women's Wing. They have now occupied some political space, as well as led the emergence of working-class women in government, especially by the beginning of the early 1980s, courtesy of an African feminist education campaign in Northern Nigeria.

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Cultivating Seeds of Transformation: Reflections of Young Facilitators on Feminist Popular Education from Mozambique

Solange Rocha, Ana Baloi, Nicole Rigon and Izelquia Mondlhane

Abstract

Since its emergence, the Pan-African feminist movement has found expression in Mozambique, especially in the promotion of women's rights. Popular education approaches have been a means of building a fairer world. This article analyses how the experience of the Female Economic Empowerment in Mozambique known as MUVA, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) present in Mozambique since 2016, created practical opportunities for emancipatory and transformative learning. Using a qualitative approach, we employed participant observation and creative letters to construct a detailed narrative. Instead of a generalised account, we offer situated reflections on MUVA's daily practices and challenges in promoting gender equality and women empowerment. Despite legislative progress in women's rights since independence, patriarchal norms still restrict women's freedom in Mozambique. Feminist popular education challenges these norms by encouraging critical thinking to disrupt systems of social reproduction. Our argument, and contribution, is that training young facilitators in the practical application of Freirean methodology, with a feminist approach, leads to significant individual and social transformations. This results in projects focused on promoting women's voices, expanding their resources and competences for decent work and economic empowerment.

Keywords: feminist popular education, Mozambique, MUVA, women's rights

Introduction

After Mozambique's independence in 1975, and through the following decades, social and intellectual movements driven by a strong sense of solidarity came together in a common effort to rebuild the country after the armed struggle, and to advance the socialist project of creating a new society. According to Trindade (2020, 42), among the intellectuals and professionals from diverse backgrounds, a prominent group was the Internationalist Women's Group which was created in 1980. It was a network of "international solidarity" dedicated to women's rights that advocated for gender equality at the international level. It brought practices of popular education and strengthened and gave visibility to the Mozambican emancipation movements.

The group included members from different countries who were attracted to Mozambique by the historic speech of Samora Machel, then President of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), suggesting an opening up of the struggle for women's rights (Trindade 2020). In that speech, Machel declared that "the emancipation of women is a fundamental necessity for the revolution, a guarantee of its continuity, and a key condition for its triumph" (Machel 1979, 18, *our translation*). This speech was given during the first Mozambican Women's Conference, where the Mozambican Women's Organization (OMM), part of FRELIMO, was founded in 1973.

The Internationalist Women's Group was deeply committed to advocating for gender equality. However, as Trindade (2020, 43) points out, they encountered significant resistance when discussing feminism, as it was perceived as a conflicting concept within the context of the class struggle. Although Samora Machel's political speeches encouraged women's emancipation, they conveyed an idea that still prevails today: that feminism "is a movement against men, that puts women and men against each other" (Trindade 2020, 178). Another negative connotation with feminism was that the first women in Mozambique to declare themselves feminists were white, indicating that feminism was something "external" and did not originate in the local culture and, therefore, incompatible with the Mozambican context. Consequently, the term "feminism" was actively avoided, and the movement opted to use the language of "the struggle for women's rights," aligning itself with Machel's discourse (Machel 1979).

Related to the 'Third World Solidarity' movement, Taela (2017) analyses how transnational relationships among feminists from the Global South have evolved over time and also brought forth the idea of solidarity among women. She cites the connections between the women's movements of the Global South, dating back to colonial times, such as the first Afro-Asian Women's Conference held in Cairo in 1961. Taela (2017, 54) explains that, despite the practical-theoretical differences and asymmetries of power, the women were united by a common struggle against colonialism and imperialism, and "various groups of formerly colonised women saw these as political alternative spaces to what was perceived as an international feminist movement dominated by the West."

In the years following independence, Mozambique entered into an armed civil conflict that began in 1977 and ended in 1992. The resulting economic and political crisis made it one of the poorest countries in the world, with profound consequences for women and children due to gender asymmetries (Federici 2019; Katto 2017; Casimiro 2014). The strategies adopted to provide better living conditions and opportunities largely came through humanitarian aid and international cooperation, particularly deepening in the context of neo-liberalism in the 1980s. Criticism of the post-independence state highlighted its failure to promote development, shaping it into a system dependent on international aid. On the other hand, similar to the colonial period, the state, regarded as autocratic, also did not allow for the growth of an autonomous social movement (Casimiro 2015; Sogge 1987). Forms of organisation emerged through associativism (associations that bring together common interests) to address everyday survival issues.

Another important turning point in the struggle for women's rights was the Beijing Conference in 1995. The political visibility of Mozambican feminism strengthened with strong participation in the United Nations (UN) conference cycle, particularly the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. The women's struggle also strengthened as it articulated with the Pan-African feminist movement, confronting systems of domination, advocating for the liberation of all African peoples. The participation of a Mozambican delegation at the Beijing Conference allowed Mozambican women to have a greater connection with global movements fighting for women's rights in countries across Southern Africa, Latin America and Europe. Signe Arnfred (1996) notes that women's movements on a

global scale, especially since the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, have gained spaces to negotiate policies on gender and development, leading to the development of action plans that broaden the focus on power relations. However, this has not redefined the agenda on development. In Mozambique, a new framework was adopted, in terms of the terminology "Mainstreaming Gender", without altering the power relations at the country level and between these countries and international donor organisations.

Many of the movements for women's rights originated in educational and research institutions, which, through their research, provided the necessary arguments to support feminist struggles (Casimiro and Andrade 2007). Thus, the feminist movement in Mozambique later found expression in various contexts, promoting gender as a prominent public issue. As Ahikire states, "gender discourses in international development have only become acceptable as a result of years of painstaking research and activism, challenging male bias in development" (2014, 12). The influence of this intellectual and activist movement, which spread to the field of gender and development in the 1990s (Moser 1995), shaped Mozambican feminism. When academic debates expanded and reached community-based organisations, the intersection with popular education made these debates more democratic and accessible to women and the most vulnerable populations.

In the following decades, Mozambican feminism, influenced by different perspectives, including Pan-African feminists and the World March of Women, strengthened its praxis by articulating agendas for political participation, advocacy for laws against domestic violence and, above all, strengthening women as leaders of the movement.

A contemporary example of the expansion of feminist discourse that influenced local movement can be seen in the women's movement in Central Mozambique (Sofala, Tete, Manica). In these provinces, since 2018, around 200 women organised by local social movements have been holding feminist solidarity camps annually to reflect on and discuss their problems and priorities. In dialogue with feminist researchers and activists, the local women use popular education practices to give a voice to, and build a safe, inclusive and caring space for all women.

Through this article, we showcase such Pan-African feminist popular education initiatives in Maputo. We engage with academic and community-based feminisms by bringing our practical experience. We ask, how, despite the contradictions and complexities of the neo-liberal context, can training young people on a micro-scale through popular education methods create emancipatory cracks in micro-structures? We explore some of the methodological pathways used in these learning spaces, how they develop and the complexities involved in operationalising them. Within the framework of Pan-African feminist popular education, the practical experience of the social incubator MUVA is used to elaborate on the points above. Formed in 2016, MUVA has centred its actions in the provinces of Maputo, Nampula and Beira, and focuses on projects aimed at the economic empowerment of women. MUVA was created by women committed to social transformations, not all of whom identify as feminists, but all of whom are strongly dedicated to improving the living conditions of women and youth. We hope to contribute to the dialogue on transformative feminist educational practices, highlighting the importance of knowledge generated from the direct experience of popular educators.

Background to MUVA

To provide context, MUVA began in 2016 as a programme funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to create innovations for youth and women's work, focusing on gender as central to transforming the social norms that create barriers for young women to achieve financial autonomy and control over their lives. Every organisational strategy is aligned with the methodology of popular education, with a feminist approach that combines participation, autonomy, dialogue and critical thinking. At the same time, the approach includes a feminist perspective that recognises and questions gender oppression with an intersectional focus.

MUVA's experience demonstrates the complexity of how the principles and practices of a feminist popular education methodology for African women and their economic emancipation can be the 'heart' of an organisation through its practitioners, without the organisation necessarily being organically feminist. It may seem contradictory, but sometimes the threads woven to build a more gender

just society coexist in practice with organisational models for development; the magic lies in weaving together the possible threads. Through the lens of gender and inclusion, often without mentioning patriarchy, we address power, voice, safety, well-being, resources for women and positive masculinities.

MUVA's organisational methodology

At MUVA, we provide a solid training for trainers. This organisational methodology of training of trainers is aimed at preparing young people for work, creating a work environment that is sensitive to gender inclusion and influencing public policies that are sensitive to expanding a decent work environment for women. MUVA dialogues with Mozambican feminisms through partnerships and the construction of learning spaces. At the national level, in diverse Mozambican cities located in the three provinces mentioned above, MUVA invests in this empowerment approach guided by studies that show the importance of soft skills for enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy to strengthen agency in women (Ault, Quak and Guimarães 2022). The provision of technical and interpersonal skills training for both men and women is linked to critical discussions about social norms and the impact of gender-based violence. It promotes the amplification of women's voices, strengthens the empowerment of young people and creates better living conditions and more opportunities for them. We will delve deeper into MUVA's experience later in this article which aims to highlight the transformative methodology adopted by the organisation, as well as the challenges faced when opting for feminist pedagogical approaches.

The methodological approach adopted in this study was qualitative and was an analysis of the experience of MUVA. It was not a conventional research study, but rather an in-depth analysis of the pedagogical practices observed and experienced by participants and educators. Our professional work in this context allows for direct immersion in the daily activities promoted by the organisation and a situated perspective (Haraway 1995), from within feminist educational practices in Mozambique.

The voices from the facilitators presented here were collected in two participative dialogue workshops conducted with inspiration from Paulo Freire's (1978) work, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. It was

an experiment in creative letter writing organised by MUVA. The workshop was online and brought together seven facilitators from Maputo and Beira in April 2023. With *Google Jamboard*, paper and pens in hand, we started with warm-up activities and experimentation with writing. Through exercises, we delved into the question: "what does popular education transform? What dreams and possible paths?". These questions guided the debate, allowing us to identify some of the key aspects of popular education that connect us to the larger goal of social practice: social transformation for gender equality. In addition to providing some answers to these questions, the workshop brought up new points of reflection, which will be explored further in the discussion that follows.

To present our reflections in this paper, we begin with a contextualisation of the Mozambican scenario and the reality of women in this context. We will then present MUVA's initiatives and the unfolding of the Freirean feminist methodological option in the field of development for individual and social transformation. Through the accounts of facilitators captured in a participatory dialogue workshop on the meanings of feminist popular education, we seek to highlight the complexities involved in implementing feminist approaches in education, highlighting the experiences lived in the field and the strategies adopted to face the specific challenges of the Mozambican context. Our argument is that the practical application of Freirean methodology, infused with a gender perspective, can lead to meaningful individual and social transformations. By working with young people in the projects, the facilitation team was intrinsically promoting gender equality and empowering women. This is evidenced by the testimonies of participants during and after the trainings, as well as by the perceptions of facilitators who closely follow the transformative process of each participant.

MUVA employs a comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning (MEL) system to gather both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a nuanced understanding of the learning processes. Each training session uses specific learning questions to gauge participants' feelings, discoveries and surprises. Facilitators meticulously track each participant's learning journey through a robust reflection framework. They look for critical consciousness, attitude changes and collective engagement as key empowerment indicators. By employing tools like the Gender Analysis Matrix (www.genderatwork.org), they

can effectively measure both visible and invisible transformations, ensuring a holistic understanding of the impact of their aspects of individual and collective empowering.

The methodological approach of popular education, with a feminist focus, requires time and collective commitment to develop critical consciousness and change attitudes. The programme took place over seven years, during which it was possible to experiment, take root in the practical-conceptual approach and train a group of facilitators. There was a desire to ensure that the methodology was at the heart of all the organisation's activities and key issues. Despite this methodology being institutionalised within MUVA, the dominant development cooperation funding model limits the exploration and strengthening of processes that require time, because time means resources. This presents challenges for popular education. While the methodological core persists, the daily practice of the project model is simplified to speed up learning processes. Reflection is then lost, critical analysis becomes limited, and this threatens the original methodological project. As we elaborate below, at MUVA we try to address these challenges.

The Emergence of Pan-Africa Feminist Popular Education in Mozambique.

There are certain realities and challenges MUVA faced while working on this Pan-African feminist popular education initiative in Mozambique. These challenges reflect broader challenging scenarios for women's development and systemic inequalities. The country faces significant poverty, with 63% of the population living on less than two dollars a day (INE 2019). Female-headed households constitute a majority at 33,8% of the population (INE 2019). The illiteracy rate is 39%, with women accounting for 49,4% (INE 2019). Young women, in particular, face challenges such as limited access to social security, rights and sustainable livelihoods (UN Women 2021). They often encounter obstacles such as low school attendance, high dropout rate and poor learning outcomes, all linked to poverty. Additionally, they carry a heavier burden of domestic work, experience insecurity, lack resources for mobility and are susceptible to moral and sexual abuse at school (Ligada 2015a).

Findings from the Urban Girls Economic Empowerment Programme (Ligada 2015a, 2015b) underscore that addressing women's economic exclusion in Mozambique goes beyond just improving economic opportunities. The study aimed to uncover the factors that restrain women's ability to take action and the circumstances that affect their access to job opportunities. Young women who participated in the study indicated their frustration regarding lack of freedom, domestic obligations, having to take care of their children alone, the stress of double or triple shifts when studying and/or working, the lack of opportunities to follow their professional dreams and gender-based violence.

Therefore, in order to empower young women in Mozambique, it is imperative to challenge these norms actively. While there have been strides in gender equality legislation, including policies against domestic violence and sanctions on early marriages, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to pose a strong barrier to dismantling gender imbalances. Successfully overcoming these challenges involves a societal transformation towards justice and the comprehensive realisation of women's rights, particularly among the younger generation.

The post-independence education system used to be regulated by community self-management, i.e. there were popular school management committees. This approach allowed communities, parents, volunteers and religious organisations to be involved in school administration, making schools places where people had power (Domingos 2015). Later on, the self-managed and decentralised model was taken over by the State, which sought to standardise community educational practices. Theoretically, the new model still valued the role of community in education; in practice, bureaucratic control weakened dialogue with communities and reduced schools' autonomy in popular pedagogical practices (Domingos 2015).

In the contemporary landscape, outside the formal education system, organisations that promote critical thinking – such as MUVA, Associação Sociocultural Horizonte Azul (ASCHA), Aliadas Program, Grupo de Mulheres de Partilha de Ideias de Sofala (GMPIS Association) and others – have been adopting the principles of feminist popular education, centred on African women and their emancipation, and employing techniques like the Theatre of the Oppressed for popular emancipation. These initiatives draw from Freirean

methodology with a feminist approach, emphasising solidarity as an essential tool for women's emancipation. That is why the feminist approach in popular education aims to enhance self-reflection and interpersonal relationships, promoting networks of solidarity among the participants. The starting point in this connection are the experiences of women in their bodies and their voices (Manicom and Walters 2012). Ultimately women, feeling part of a community with shared life experiences, are emboldened to recognise and question gender oppressions.

Aligned with Freire (1996), education for women's emancipation in Mozambique is a collective effort, a shared climb that exemplifies the solidarity among women to uplift one another. From a decolonial Pan-African perspective, feminist education, through the organisations of civil society, encourages the strengthening of community ties and the total autonomy of women as a way of "climbing the rope" (Casimiro 2004, 3). Thus, collective solidarity is the means by which women are increasingly occupying public spaces, questioning the roles assigned to them in the reproductive sphere and affirming that they too have the right to citizenship, making visible struggles that were previously silenced (Taela and Rocha 2021).

Considering the Mozambican scenario and the emergence of popular education in this context, a strong Pan-African feminist presence is evident in the approach to education. One of the reasons MUVA's popular education is considered feminist is its commitment to dismantling patriarchal binaries by positioning women in the public-private sphere and reproductive-productive spaces, recognising the importance of sharing reproductive labour and focusing on power relations, the voices of participants and the body-mind connection—emotions. It prioritises community empowerment as a crucial element for emancipation, without creating dependence ties with institutions. The popular education model values horizontality and collaborative knowledge construction. This form of education is feminist as it challenges formal educational norms rooted in patriarchy, questioning the monopoly of knowledge, hierarchical structures and the lack of autonomy for learners. In the following section, we delve into the approach of MUVA in working with Pan-African feminist popular education.

MUVA's Way of Doing Pan-African Feminist Popular Education

MUVA emerged as a response to the social issues identified in Ligada's studies cited above. Focusing on visible and invisible aspects of gender oppression and committed to acting for equity, rebalancing opportunities and economic stability for women and men, MUVA seeks to develop professional skills, job opportunities and self-awareness of the power to challenge patriarchal social norms that support gender inequalities in Mozambique. In addition to participating in the debate surrounding public policies and legal rights for women, and creating opportunities to access the job market, MUVA also addresses issues such as microaggressions and daily exclusions in its training sessions. These "invisible" matters are frequently downplayed, yet they persistently constrain and curtail women's freedom of existence.

Regarding the context and the social profile, MUVA works with young men and women, between 18 and 30 years of age, living in vulnerable situations in peripheral neighbourhoods and from low-income families. In the Mozambican context, patriarchy is strictly rooted in the forms of sociability even before someone is born. Thus, young people arrive at the training space with a very conservative stance on gender issues, but begin to question their convictions. By coming into contact with non-hegemonic thinking on gender equality, they are invited to reflect on their identity and subjectivity.

To illustrate the persistence of long-term patriarchal patterns in daily experiences of participants, one frequently hears statements in the workshops that naturalise patriarchy: "the man is the rooster of the house", "a man who cries is not a man", "a woman's place is in the kitchen", "a woman does not think, she only remembers", "Tsimba capulana dzi Tiya." These affirmations construct an ideal of an obedient woman, confined to the domestic space and without a voice. Men, on the other hand, must be strong, providers and bosses. In this sense, we recognise the need to address the contradictions between the pursuit of a more egalitarian society and the prevalence of unequal gender relations. Through reflective processes we seek to demonstrate that patriarchal structures affect all people. Young people are invited to reflect on the consequences of sexism not only for women, but also for men – influencing their emotional expressions and

health, pressurising them to be providers and encouraging aggressive and risky behaviours for themselves and others.

Talking about these issues and centring the dialogue around life experiences is only possible by creating a safe space for sharing. A person's "power within" is the key to the development of soft skills (Bischler and Rebelo 2019). This means that if one wants to teach young people, especially young women, one has to start by working on their inner barriers that stem from social norms and power imbalances. Creating a safe, judgment-free space for introspection and reflection is the first step in our trainings, allowing young people to reflect on who they are and the social norms that surround them. We achieve this through activities that involve building agreements on coexistence, established by the participants themselves.

These agreements invariably highlight the value of non-judgment, followed by other activities designed to develop active listening and introspection. Placing a particular focus on reflection around gender norms helps young men and women understand and challenge the power relationships that determine the roles assigned to them by society. During this process, young people are encouraged to begin thinking about questions such as "how did I get to where I am?", "what are the experiences that define me?" and "what constrains me and why?".

It is important for young people to understand what internal and external factors influence them and which ones they can control versus which ones they cannot (Bischler and Rebelo 2019). This makes participants feel capable and realise the value of their voice and their opinions and also builds new foundations for their thoughts and arguments. Becoming aware of the vulnerabilities and inequalities that surround us is the first step for these young women and men to act in a transformative way, driving change in their realities and in power asymmetries.

The recognition of barriers and the development of new personal skills to overcome them are an important part of women's economic empowerment, but this only becomes a possibility after raising awareness on these matters. For a transformation at the individual level, creating a secure environment is a starting point for MUVA's methodological approach.

Our conceptual and methodological references are from the educator Paulo Freire and from Latin American, Indian and South African popular and feminist educators (Manicom and Walters 2012; Torres 1988; Kumar 2016; Portela and Gouveia 1999). The methodological basis is highly participatory and follows the principles of active learning and liberating education (Freire 1974). Power relations and gender are cross-cutting themes in the trainings, which we call "lenses" of analysis. In this theoretical-methodological construction, we create space for critical reflections on self, family, social structures and community (Rocha et al. 2022).

On a practical level, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills trainings are designed to develop the self-confidence of participants, considering the target group profile, which is young people who have already finished primary education and are looking for their first job opportunity. These trainings run over two-months, four days a week, focusing on the individual and her or his relationship with society, using a gender prism to support personal reflection. Rather than merely teaching young people about the kind of behaviour that is expected in the workplace, the facilitators help participants reflect on the social norms in their community, their own abilities and personal challenges. They then explore how this relates to their actual or future working life (Bischler and Rebelo 2019).

The workshops follow a flow of training sessions that have been designed based on participatory diagnosis and consultation, developed and practised for at least two years. The objectives of the activities in each session reflect the following steps in the transformation process:

1. Introspection and reflection – "who am I?"
2. Self-awareness – "what can I do?"
3. Choice and control – "what do I want?"

By using these steps as guidelines for the training, we are slowly uncovering the layers of the participants' self and supporting them in discovering their inner power to have a voice and make choices.

Learning through deep reflections

The activities' objectives are achieved through the following techniques:

- games and group dynamics
- promoting physical movement, cooperation
- fun and relaxation which help with deeper reflection
- role-playing and dramatisation – encouraging creativity and allowing participants to take advantage of and value the experience
- expressing feelings and promoting reflection
- group work with moments for sharing
- discussions, negotiation and valuing of ideas
- case studies, stimulating critical thinking and the expression of ideas and feelings
- short videos and films, helping reflections to begin and end the discussion on a given topic
- meditation and energiser with Qi Gong and Tai Chi Chuan
- promoting relaxation and managing emotions.

Facilitators are carefully chosen based on their competencies, but more importantly, because they share similar life experiences and reside in the same neighbourhoods as the participants. This deliberate selection ensures that knowledge is shared through the lens of shared experiences and a common reality. It fosters a learning environment that is "with" rather than "about" other than formal education; this is a collaborative journey, grounded in the collective reality of their lives. This approach underscores the belief that true learning emerges not solely from imparting information but from the shared understanding and lived experiences of both facilitators and participants.

The effort is to ensure that confronting differences does not reflect a barrier and that learning is affirmed. Another aspect is that collective construction can sometimes fall into traps as the implementation of training is tied to indicators and processes imposed by the donor. In such cases, a minimum "package" is negotiated that does not compromise the methodological approach.

From a facilitator's perspective, in popular education facilitating is connecting different people, knowledge and experiences in a learning environment. It is a plural and dynamic process, full of stories. These stories, endowed with a life of their own, when shared, highlight the transformative power of facilitation. According to Izelquia Mondhlane, it

> Awakens the will to fly, aware of the long journey. Facilitating is going back to yourself, to your base, and discovering when, where and how you armed yourself with knowledge, beliefs, wills, and uniforms that do not belong to you. Facilitating awakens a willingness to ask your mind to help you question how you got here. Facilitating invites you to reflect, to hope.

In MUVA's approach, educational processes are continuously created and recreated and the manuals that result from them are not "cake recipes": they are guides of principles and values so that each facilitator can internalise and adapt each process based on the reading of reality. The content of the activities presented in the manuals was developed from indicators of human behaviour, namely: communication, teamwork, concentration, motivation, emotional capacity and self-knowledge. The objectives of the activities have been developed based on these indicators. For example, if we want young people to develop the ability to work as a team and communicate, we propose dynamics in which they have to build a small project collectively and present it to others. This is followed by collective feedback so that participants can improve their skills with the input of others.

Therefore, in our activities of reflection on social norms, we invite participants to discover how the practices, habits and customs that create gender inequalities are culturally installed. For example, simple exercises to reflect on one's own life and write down phrases that are part of one's stories within one's cultural contexts is already an invitation to question naturalised "truths". In these activities, we reflect on the effect that common phrases have in creating sexist mentalities that reaffirm women's inability to make decisions and that women must endure oppression and violence.

The transformation unfolds through group activities and personal introspection, prompting participants to engage in reflective contemplation on "who I am". This process involves a critical examination of individual strengths

and areas for improvement. In doing so, it paves the way for new potential life trajectories and future perspectives (Rocha et al. 2022).

Listening actively is an essential element in this journey. Practising judgment-free active listening is what creates the conditions for learning through practice and mistakes. This provides a safe space guided by principles of caring and valuing feelings where different voices are heard and participants feel they belong.

This dive into self-reflection is coupled with analysis about context, family, community and inequalities. The process is not one of individuation, but of identifying oneself as a subject belonging to a collective. The trainings discuss the roots of inequalities that limit access to work, as well as public policies that directly affect women, such as the domestic violence protection law. It reflects on the contents of feminist research and disseminates information for access to fundamental services for human rights.

It is worth noting that in MUVA, the incorporation of emancipatory values is a daily practice. MUVA also conducts internal processes of reflection and learning through regular meetings and ongoing internal training. MUVA challenges itself to build a more horizontal organisational culture with critical awareness.

The essence of the process is learning from each other, recognising and respecting different opinions. Those who teach also learn, those who learn teach. Learning happens not through what is heard, but through the experiences and feelings involved in the process. The path of learning is not linear and the feelings experienced are not fixed. One experiences moments of confusion, anger and love and the latter is what stimulates empathy to be able to understand that the transformation in this process will not always be at the expected moment. What we realise is that reflections enable the mind to blossom and give signs of the first breaches that will cause the change in the structure.

The conceptual foundations of feminist popular education represent the construction of a new framework for understanding the world and social dynamics. Diverging from the unilateral approaches found in formal educational institutions, this educational model aims to establish a horizontal and collective structure. This horizontality is evident in several ways: the arrangement of the

classroom is always circular, promoting equality and visibility among participants; the agreements on coexistence are not imposed unilaterally but are democratically constructed by the participants themselves; and everyone has the right to speak, be heard, and have their opinions valued by both facilitators and peers. This approach ensures that all voices are respected and contributes to a more inclusive and empowering learning environment. In this perspective, knowledge-building is not a one-way transmission but a collaborative process where all voices are valued. This horizontal approach seeks not only to inform but also to empower and, crucially, to question established norms. Feminist popular education, thus, goes beyond mere information transfer, becoming an effective tool for deconstructing traditional paradigms and collectively building new foundations to contemplate social relations and society as a whole. This kind of approach is especially effective in societies such as Mozambique, whose social norms are still very much rooted in a patriarchal ideology and, on a practical level, restrict liberties and opportunities for women.

Roses and Thorns in the Field of Transformation

The journey of transformation through popular education involves in-depth acts of deconstruction. This movement needs to start from the inside out, as Dionisio Mahumane, a facilitator, said in the reflection session about popular education: "it is a deconstruction and construction of knowledge from the inside out", and for this, it is necessary to "use tools that enable thinking and reflecting on their dreams". From there, participants ask themselves where they come from and what shapes their decisions, choices and opinions.

The planting metaphor emerged as an argument to access the inner meanings of feminist popular education as a political movement of human transformation. According to facilitator Ana Baloi, facilitating is like sowing a seed in the ground, where love and respect are essential nutrients: "just like a seed thrown into the ground, deep questions are asked with love and great respect, without hurting and without judging, just questioning the other person as a human". In the same way as growing a plant, learning and transformation are slow processes and can sometimes even be painful. The facilitator acts as a farmer who is close by, ready to accompany and nurture the whole journey. In

this perspective, we interpret popular education as an act of "cultivating seeds of transformation". It consists in sowing a world in which women are not subaltern anymore. It is in the learning process, in the analysis of the conditions and needs of men and women, that self-awareness and social responsibility emerge.

There is a consensus among facilitators that popular education has a collective essence and needs humility to work. Altina Fidélia, another facilitator, pointed out that it is easier to face some challenges hand in hand, and the attitude of the educator should not be that of a knowledge holder. In the words of this facilitator: "I like to exercise humility to recognise when I am facing a difficulty and ask for help. We show that we can count on each other."

Reflections are made dialogically, asking questions in plenary and stimulating everyone's voice, including the most shy and those with difficulty of expression. In this way, we create a space for experimenting with the power of the voice and we leave those who participate in learning looser and happier, because they learn more naturally. A young participant in one of the trainings reported her experience thus: "I have learnt while playing" (MUVA Link project's participant 2023).

We recognise the transformative power of feminist popular education and its enriching facets. Nevertheless, we are also faced with some of its pitfalls. One issue that appeared prominently in the workshop narratives was the sense of confusion and suffering that arises during the process of deconstruction, echoed by the team of facilitators, which we will see below.

The awakening of social conscience brings a liberation impulse but also generates suffering for the rupture of a naturalised world vision. In the words of one facilitator, Izelquia Mondlhane: "To facilitate this liberating approach is to create tools for awakening, but sometimes people don't know how to manage it". This is why practising empathy and actively listening to oneself and others becomes a fundamental aspect of feminist popular education.

Thinking critically about the social relations of oppression in which we are immersed involves a profound attitude of questioning. A differential relationship with doubt and uncertainty is created, as Izelquia, the facilitator cited above, states, "it awakens an inner look to seek answers that no one will be able to give. Answers that sometimes we don't find". Also on the search for answers,

Dionisio, a previously cited facilitator, highlights the effect of time, showing that transformation is a lengthy process, "we search slowly through the world for those answers that influence our way and the ways we influence people". In complementarity to Dionisio's opinion, Ana Baloi, a facilitator, adds:

> Sometimes it's not automatic thinking, but a mess.
> It is the mere idea of doing something different.
> That we invest in the person, that already makes a difference.
> We make it grow by respecting, loving. We don't make
> noise for the flower to grow,
> but we allow the necessary time for this flower to grow.

Experiencing this "mess", referred to by Ana, can lead to a socially unsettling experience as it can potentially distance us from our comfort zone or usual mindset. Instead of looking for quick fixes or easy answers, feminist education methodologies encourage people to remain in this state of uncertainty or confusion, as in a "reflective pause". Participants are encouraged to "remain in the dilemma" (Didi-Huberman 2013), a reflective state in which we stand before a work of art that unsettles us. This is achieved through dialogue between participants and facilitators to provoke thought and introspection, rather than providing immediate solutions to challenging questions or uncomfortable issues. In an environment where participants are encouraged to sit with their discomfort and reflect deeply, they develop critical thinking skills and a more profound understanding of complex social issues.

By experiencing the deconstruction of social norms, facilitators and participants enrich their understanding of historical, cultural and emotional factors that constitute social reality, as well as question their own beliefs and certainties. In the context of feminist popular education, staying in the dilemma is especially relevant, as dealing with gender inequality involves eschewing definitive answers and simplistic solutions to face the contradictions, ambiguities and challenges in the quest for women's emancipation and gender equality.

Confusion is part of the process of transformation and, as we delve deeper into critical thinking, we come to imagine new possible worlds. With reflection, we take a step forward towards transformative action, weaving new dialogues that are capable of transforming "the hegemonic androcentric narratives of

pan-Africanist history that erase women's participation" (Abbas and Mama 2014, 4) and curtail their freedoms and rights.

Final Words, For Now…

Pan-African feminist popular education creates 'cracks' in patriarchal structures, either by internalising practices disruptive to systems of oppressions, or by transforming relationships and practices that empower young people for economic empowerment through creating an enabling environment in families and workplaces. Creating these cracks, or micro-cracks, is the impulse, the kick to awaken the transformative spirit that already exists within those with a common feeling of non-conformity with social and gender injustice.

The transformative education approach brings tools that open the vision, brings a new way of seeing this world by asking, listening actively and not expecting particular answers. It is important to point out that this process, while bringing us hope for a better world, is not free of contradictions, conflicts and stressful challenges that a still rigid social structure can bring. In the collective dimension of empowerment, people feel confident to confront the patriarchal structure but in individual experiences, confronting this structure can be an experience that implies significant losses and radical life change, which, as facilitator Izelquia rightly mentioned, "not all people know how to manage".

There are also the complexities and contradictions inherent in processes that seek to combine social transformation in short-term projects, which crucially expose the limits of practical and conceptual experience in implementing a feminist popular education project in the Mozambican historical context. This reflects a model of neoliberal development implemented in recent decades, which coexists with people and organisations carrying out emancipatory processes. Such limits also underlie the 'fragile link' between civil society organisations in the field of women's rights or feminist causes. Collaborative synergies do occur, as seen in the work of MUVA with ASCHA, which resulted in a mentorship methodology with young people. However, it cannot be said that the various experiences of feminist popular education in Mozambique converge in a broad way to build the Mozambican feminist movement.

Overall, we realise through our experiences that Pan-African feminist popular education has the power to create profound changes in society by encouraging individuals to question patriarchal structures and denaturalise oppressive social relations. Through small acts of empowerment and rebellion, young people change their own trajectories and contribute to change in the world around them.

Through this article, we seek to share our perspective and experiences to contribute to academic debates on the subject of feminist popular education about the contradictions, complexities and possibilities of working with popular education methods in microstructures in the neoliberal context in countries like Mozambique. Our aim is to spark interdisciplinary discussions and inspire more initiatives like this one, contributing to the expansion of Pan-African feminist popular education in Global Africa. Recognising the big challenges that all of us engaged in the feminist struggle face, we believe it is crucial to bridge the gap between academia and civil society

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Theory in Action: A Pan-Africanist Online African Feminist Reading Group

Corinne Knowles, Linda Mensah and Mathe Ntšekhe

Abstract

African Feminisms, including Pan-African Feminism, emphasise that there are multiple ways of knowing, and that profound knowledge can emerge from unlikely locations and groups. Popular and informal knowledge-making arises from collective and participatory learning platforms generated by the socially and politically marginalised, with the intention to recognise, value, inspire and challenge each other to grow, transform and find liberation. This paper considers one such intentional online popular education community started in 2020, called the *African Feminist Reading Group*. This online group has expanded and contracted over the past four years to accommodate African, Scottish and African diasporic women who seek both active and passive communal engagement with African Feminist ideas and the pursuit of Pan-Africanist objectives. We share our experiences of the online reading group to show how African Feminist praxis, in the form of radical care, vulnerability, working with differences, learning from each other, solidarity and collaboration, expands and transforms how and what we know and who we are in relation to each other.

Keywords: African Feminisms, decolonial praxis, radical care, transformative learning, virtual feminist epistemic communities

Introduction

Academic imperialism has led to the marginalisation of alternative kinds of knowledge and knowledge-making despite their profound transformational effects on their users and producers. African Feminist thought and other decolonial approaches to knowledge-making confront this universalism by welcoming and legitimising a broader range of possibilities for what counts as knowledge (Moletsane 2015). Popular and informal education is about ways of learning and producing knowledge outside of regular and formalised institutions. In a Pan-Africanist context, this kind of educational practice is focused on individual and collective liberation and justice on the continent and in the diaspora (Benya and Yeni 2022).

Reading groups, as spaces for popular education, have played key roles in Black feminist and Pan-African feminist movements by providing spaces for women to create their own ideals of conscientisation, solidarity and knowledge-making (McHenry 2002; Davies 2014; Farr 2022). A notable example is the *Sisterhood*, a Black women's writing group from the 1970s that served partly as a reading group and the foundation for creating other reading groups. This group — which was made up of Nana Maynard, Ntozake Shange, Louse Meriwether, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Alice Walker, Audrey Edwards, June Jordan and Toni Morrison — embodied a revolutionary ethic of Black feminist sisterhood through which they maintained critical and collective reflections on Black women's stories and the idea of finding others, of being read and being understood (Greenidge 2023). In doing so, this reading and writing circle refused to footnote themselves within the mainstream literary world, as they assigned one another's work to their students long before that work was considered part of the canon. Another notable example of an African Feminist reading group as a form of popular education is highlighted in the work of Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani (2022). They present their *Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group* as an extracurricular space that offers community.

In this paper, we situate our African Feminist reading group within feminist traditions of reading groups. We reflect on the relational onto-epistemologies and axiology (Chilisa 2017) of the group as a contribution to the conversations about the overlaps and synergies between the transformational effects of a virtual

African Feminist epistemic community and Pan-African popular education. In doing so, we explore how the discursive processes, pedagogical approaches and feminist praxis embodied in this reading group offer insightful critiques of the "male-stream"/mainstream decolonisation discourse, and the way it has not recognised long-existing African Feminist praxis in knowledge-making and epistemic community formation.

The *African Feminist Reading Group,* as we call it, is made up of creatives, women pursuing PhDs, administrators and scholars in several universities who find themselves on the margins, particularly in the racialised spaces of the ivory tower. Over the past four years since its formation, the group has undergone different iterations in its decolonising intent to disrupt a reliance on traditional academic methods and conventions, and to emphasise instead the political and emotional rigour that generates transformational feminist knowledge. In conversing about African women issues and the Pan-Africanist liberatory project, we use the oral and other relevant archives to effectively "grapple with the contradictory realities faced by women across various classes and income-levels" (Mkhize 2018, 137).

What follows is a discussion outlining the reflexive methodology we use. We then locate the reading group in the history and politics of African women's learning, friendship and solidarity through epistemic communities with a Pan-Africanist orientation. Our reflection on the reading group aligns with what we understand as popular education, and shows how the virtual space, while it can be exclusive and dangerous, can also be a platform for radical care and communal knowledge-making.

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

This paper's purpose and methodological approach employs the reflexive perceptions and experiences of the authors to locate the *African Feminist Reading Group* in an African Feminist and Pan-Africanist popular education framework. We write as insiders of the group, who have shared our deliberations in one of our reading group sessions for the input of the group. We address the contestations and complexities at the intersections of African Feminisms and Pan-Africanism as we show how our online group is embedded within the core concepts and

values of conscientisation, radical transformative politics, community-building and the emancipatory possibilities that undergird both ideological and political movements. We show how selected African Feminist values and principles from Bamberg et al. (2021), when practised in an informally operating group which we regard in a Freirean sense as a form of popular education (Freire 1970), can bring solidarity and transformational learning to local and diasporic African Feminists and their allies. We explain more broadly, how this trans-continental solidarity building in our reading group, the African Feminist scholarship we engage with and our embodiment of *ubuntu* are all geared towards the political and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora (Adebajo 2020). *Ubuntu*, in an ontological sense, serves as a reminder that our humanity is infused and entangled with our relationships to each other.

Our reflections are guided by our positionalities as women who live and work in different geographical locations and who act as small representatives of a larger web of connections — between people of different races, continents, faculties, languages, orientations and backgrounds. Knowles writes as a white South African woman who researches and teaches at the intersection of African Feminisms, politics and sociology, through which she remains in constant reflexivity about her contributions to and positionality within social justice movements in the country. Mensah is a Ghanaian based in Scotland, where she teaches and researches the interconnections between environmental law and resource extractivism through a decolonial, African Feminist lens. Ntšekhe is a Mosotho based in Lesotho where she also deploys African Feminist thought in teaching and amplifying the voice and visibility of women in computer science. What we have in common is the intention to learn from each other, recognising that we are constituted by each other and are committed to community and what we call radical care, which we explain in more detail later.

Pan-African Feminist Popular Education through Reading Groups

Drawing from the participatory education practices in Paulo Freire's work, Manicom and Walters (2012) explain popular education as participatory, dialogical, inventive and community-oriented pedagogical practices that foster

critical consciousness and the collective production of emancipatory knowledge and praxis. In examining the affinities between feminist praxis and popular education, Manicom and Walters (2012) highlight the political commitment of feminist popular education to addressing relations of dominance through reflexivity and sensitivity to different ways of apprehending the world, as well as contesting and refining the politics of solidarity. The transformative possibilities created through such feminist epistemic communities serve more than a formal educational purpose: they offer a community building strategy that disrupts the university façade (Okech 2020, 324). Benya and Yeni (2022) highlight how popular education platforms provide African women with an avenue to transcend political and social marginalisation and enable the creation of their own collective and participatory learning spaces. This underscores the fact that African Feminists can develop, refine and popularise local feminist concepts that stretch those already existing, thereby making them more meaningful and effective for analysing gendered oppressions and subordinations (Benya and Yeni 2022).

The particularity of our contribution to this long-standing history of reading groups as feminist popular education is our use of the virtual space for trans-continental solidarity building and our emphasis on African Feminisms that are imbued with community as a decolonial praxis. In building this virtual feminist community therefore, we exemplify a decolonial approach to knowledge creation and sharing, where we work across North and South boundaries and re-imagine epistemological infrastructures that celebrate communality, global feminist solidarity, friendship and liberatory practices grounded in African Feminisms.

Pan-Africanism and Creating Diasporic, Pan-Africanist and African Feminist Epistemic Communities

Rhoda Reddock uses the term Pan-Africanism to describe "the conscious identification with Africa and critiques of European domination and racism, as well as the mutual responsibility of persons of African descent dispersed throughout the world, to each other, wherever they may be located" (2014, 59). Since originating in the diaspora in the early 20th century, Pan-Africanism has

focused on the politics of African identity and resistance in the face of structural systems of racism, slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Reddock 2006). This shows the commonalities between Pan-Africanism and diasporic relations which, as Carol Boyce Davies (2014) notes, also intersected with feminism as 20th century political positions which challenged entrenched systems of racial and gender domination.

Even as the continental mainstream Pan-African agenda remains confronted by institutionalised support for patriarchal values (Salami 2015), Pan-African Feminist movements continue to pursue the long-standing history of women's cultural production and organising towards unity and solidarity on the continent and the diaspora. African Feminisms, broadly speaking, emerged as oppositional to patriarchy and misogyny, pursuing a contextual perspective to counter colonial brutalities and effects on the continent (Oyěwùmí 2002). Through varied approaches, including networking, activism and research informed by a rich history of African philosophy, spirituality and resistances, revolutionary Pan-African Feminists have been at the forefront of movements confronting multiple vectors of cultural and material subjugations while infusing class and racial analysis in their discourse on gender and sexuality (Hargreaves 2023). Feminist Pan-Africanism therefore emerged as the visionary ideological frame towards a transnational political movement concerned with the complete liberation of all African peoples (Abbas and Mama 2014). The transnational feminist praxis of these movements functioned as part of a wider anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist endeavour by bringing together the logic of the intersection between Pan-Africanism and feminism. In doing so, they articulated an emphasis on grassroot mobilisations, knowledge production and advocacy that transcended state constructed borders to develop frameworks that are simultaneously intersubjective, comparative and relational, yet historically specific and grounded (Davies 2014). By tracing the activism and scholarly works of earlier Pan-Africanists who were feminists (or feminists who were Pan-Africanist), Davies highlights the conjunction between the seemingly disparate positions of Pan-Africanism and feminism through which Pan-African Feminists operated with an understanding of the simultaneity of political oppressions and political positions (2014, 81).

It is within this trans-locationality that we situate our online *African Feminist Reading Group* as a diasporic, Pan-African Feminist epistemic community as decolonial praxis. Our reading group is Pan-African in the sense that our conceptual framework, the methodology of our engagements and the politics of our knowledge-making and sharing are all guided by the core value of pursuing the cultural, political and socio-economic liberation of Africa through challenging and transforming systems of inequality embedded in the dominant epicentres of knowledge-making about Africa and African women. As a meeting of African Feminist researchers who share the liberatory themes of Pan-Africanism, this space is a safe haven for us freely to express our frustrations with malestream Pan-Africanism in academia, which as Mama (2017) argues, is where men dominate and resist feminist scholarship, perpetuating its global and continental subjugation.

At the founding of the group, we envisioned it as a place where diasporic and continental-based women can meet outside the confines and formalities of the ivory tower to pursue discursive engagements relating to African women and African Feminist thought. Over time, this group has grown to constitute women of different races, ages, nationalities and ethnicities, all of whom share a common interest in African women and the Pan-Africanist liberatory project. Pan-Africanism, to us, involves the socio-economic, political and cultural liberation of Africa through a genuine engagement with the invaluable contribution, scholarship, movements and resistances of African and African diasporic women against extractivist patriarchal capitalism and its hydra of configurations on our lands, communities, bodies and minds. We channel these frustrations by celebrating the African Feminists whose activism and scholarly works are located within Pan-Africanism towards confronting the particular placement of African Feminist scholarship and Pan-Africanism within the continental and global landscape of knowledge-making. We achieve this through an onto-epistemic prioritisation of Black feminism, African Feminisms and Afrocentric scholarship in our readings and generative discussions. Afrocentricity, as Asante (2020) explains it, shares the Pan-Africanist goal of the necessity for African mental liberation. Afrocentricity goes further to transcend the disruptive insertion of colonialism, slavery and imperialism into African history by asserting the centrality of Africans within the context of African phenomena (Asante 2020, 211).

This allows us to centre the experiences and voices of those who have historically been marginalised and excluded from mainstream academic discourse.

Reading group members, some of whom find themselves in the diaspora, come from different African countries. Our commonality around profound love for African Feminist scholarship, African interests in the post-colony, and the warmth which has grown between us, unites us across our different backgrounds. This praxis of Pan-Africanist and African Feminist ideas brings wholeness to our reading group, helping us to achieve what Okech (2020, 23) describes as "the co-creation of knowledge production spaces which are generative rather than extractive"; since, despite our differences, there is trust.

The African Feminist Reading Group

The online reading group, which we call the *African Feminist Reading Group*, was founded in 2020 by Knowles and Mensah. The two founding members had begun their PhD studies using African Feminist framing and wanted to foster a supportive environment for their academic pursuits. It soon became a meeting of friends with the intention of expanding our knowledge about African Feminisms but also checking in on each other during an unprecedented global pandemic that plunged the world into lockdowns and isolations. Ironically, and fortunately for us, it was within these moments that we were brought into an even closer community, across time and space.

The group, which started with four members and currently sits at 43, has gradually grown to include friends and colleagues who were invited by word of mouth, and who joined because they also shared and believed in the Pan-African Feminist values of the group in their research, creative works and activism. As the group grew, we rotated the facilitation of the sessions fortnightly. This was done strategically to disrupt a reliance on one person to lead by opening up agency and empowerment to all members of the group. It also led to increased diversity in the pieces that were submitted for discussion: they extended beyond formal academic books and journal articles to include other literary and visual pieces such as poetry and videos. Above all, shared facilitation was done to establish our own peer review process where members are encouraged to bring their work — draft books, chapters, or papers — and to lead discussion and gain

valuable input from the group. In doing so, we disrupt the hierarchies that often limit who can speak and whose opinions are deemed worthy and transcend what can sometimes be an overly critical and intimidating dynamic in academia and the creative spaces. In our discussions, through kindness, openness and respect, we welcome the experiences, interpretations and reflections of all, regardless of age, stage, background and achievements.

We prioritise the deepening of connections and engagement with each other in a few ways. Before each session begins, we share how we are and what is on our minds. After each session, the audio of our discussions is posted on the group email allowing those who did not attend to engage with those who did. This practice reinforces the value of knowledge preservation and aligns with Okech's (2017) call to develop longer trajectories of feminist knowledge production that we can return to as part of our contemporary ways of building movements. By facilitating this practice, the internet and its digital tools become useful in flattening power hierarchies that are associated with access to knowledge.

In navigating this virtual onto-epistemic space, we maintain a reflexivity grounded in African Feminist methodologies and decolonial practices to ensure that we do not replicate the gender, race and class-oppressive context in society which also tends to manifest in online spaces (Iyer 2021, 93). We are very intentional in creating an epistemically generative, rather than extractive space, by a praxis grounded in African Feminist principles of kindness, care, respect, reflexivity and accountability – sometimes challenging each other in the group (and occasionally afterwards) about the words we use, and regularly reflecting on how the group discussions are impacting how we feel (grateful, empowered, seen) and how we do our scholarly and pedagogic work. This typifies what Okech (2020, 3) aptly describes as "a critical lifeline for surviving and thinking through power relations between knowers and the ecosystem that shapes the construction of knowledge" in a world that is riddled with hostile knowledge-making contexts.

Virtual Onto-epistemic Feminist Spaces as Sites of Popular Education and Knowledge Production

In recent years, the internet and other digital technologies have offered powerful tools for feminist-led movements to surmount the constraints presented by rigid

colonial borders and language zones (Abbas and Mama 2014). Agunwa (2024) confirms that the digital space has enhanced the visibility of women's movements in Africa, creating a platform for their voices to resonate within and outside the continent. While Pan-African Feminist movements of the 20th century, such as the one involving Amy Ashwood Garvey, were able to forge impressive international and intra-regional solidarities without modern communications technology (Reddock 2014), advancements in information communications technology and the proliferation of social media and digital tools have made it even easier to overcome spatial and temporal barriers, leading us into an era of rapidly expanding cyberfeminism (Nyambura 2018) and Pan-African solidarity.

We are witnessing in real time women across the continent mobilising on social media and other digital platforms as feminist digital counter-publics. As Okech drew from Lamont Hill, these are spaces "where any virtual, online or otherwise digitally networked communities actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues or negotiate oppositional identities" (2021, 4). Through social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook, women in Africa and the diaspora have been able to catalyse the evolution of feminist communities of knowledge and solidarity in resisting online misogyny and its material manifestations in femicide (Okech 2021). However, as Agunwa (2024) rightly emphasises, the digital arena is not available to all and is also open to bullying, harassment and abuse. These concerns were pivotal to discussions in the recent Feminist Africa/International Feminist Journal of Politics joint Conference on Digitalization, AI and Feminist Futures (2024) which highlighted how modern technological revolutions are embedded in patriarchal, capitalist and imperialist logics. This joint conference further highlighted how online harassment, violence, surveillance and other forms of digital divides marked by intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender and generation have become even more heightened. One of the ways to address these issues is to cultivate "safe and inclusive digital spaces for everyone, where women's voices are amplified, their rights are protected, and their leadership is valued" (Agunwa 2024, 122). The creation of our *African Feminist Reading Group* as a safe space where feminist solidarity is nurtured, and African women's intellectual labour is amplified, aimed to heed this crucial feminist call.

Admittedly, our *African Feminist Reading Group* is not the first African Feminist reading group, nor the first feminist epistemic community to use virtual tools as a platform. A notable example of the use of digital technological adeptness in promoting visibility of African Feminist knowledges is *Feminist Africa*, which was originally envisaged as an online intellectual forum for feminist research and activism. Since its establishment over two decades ago, this journal has grown significantly in its promotion of independent feminist scholarship as an activist project (Radloff 2013). More on the digital front, *Hub of Loving Action in Africa* (HOLAA!) and *None on the Record* respectively serve as online platforms that use digital storytelling, archiving and knowledge production for queer African women and African LGBTQ communities. Okech (2020, 322) attests to a virtual reading circle established by a group of African Feminists based in South Africa, serving as an alternative learning platform where the individualised and siloed approach to learning African Feminist knowledge in the university setting is decentred.

These further demonstrate how, in the digital era, African Feminists are building Pan-African solidarity and acquiring knowledge outside the bounds of the classrooms, formal organisations and governments. Essentially, they are being empowered through popular education. We understand this as an inclusive modality of learning which allows a more holistic, embodied, personal and relational expression than we find in the formal spaces we occupy. As African women in academia and the creative space, we have nurtured this reading group as a separate forum for us to engage fully with our histories and contemporary African Feminist theorisations, movements and praxis. By using Zoom — a video conferencing software — our reading group has since its inception acted as a virtual platform that infuses a paradigm shift from traditional forums of research and knowledge diffusion. In the post-Covid-19 pandemic world, where concerns about the imperviousness of nation-state borders, global health and access to research remains prevalent in discourses on feminist ethics of research, the use of this virtual platform has proven to be effective for us. It has allowed us to build a growing network that represents what Mohanty (2003) referred to as "feminism without borders." This is despite the different parameters related to internet access, such as speed and quality of connection, which often poses

uneven access to complete visual engagement among all members to enable non-verbal cues and body language to be factored in the interactions.

The virtual *African Feminist Reading Group,* as an onto-epistemic feminist community, recognises that knowledge is embodied, and that we all come into this space ready to expand the frontiers of hegemonic knowledge production in ways that also acknowledge the politics of the body and the legitimacy of emotions and experiences. Despite the potential disembodiment that comes with meeting online, we were and remain intentional about making connections across similarities and differences, with humility and empathy (Nnaemeka 2005). As Byrne (2020, 8) argues, "solidarity, ally-hood and respect … take account of differences between feminists of different groups and allow colonial onto-epistemological hierarchies to be broken down". Knowledge as embodied provokes the conscientisation of our histories and contexts as differently raced and aged people living on different continents, and how this affects our positionality in relation to each other and to African Feminist theory. When we talk about the embodiment of knowledge, we refer to the ways in which knowledge can hold the embodiment of the oppressive, hierarchical structures we find in society, especially knowledge that is rooted in colonialism (Wilson-Tagoe 2003). A consequence of our constant exposure to Eurocentric, individualistic mainstream university knowledge is that the western inspired Cartesian dualism creates "a false division between mind and body in experiential learning that obscures our physical internalisation of social realities" (Nguyen and Larson 2015, 335). As Gqola (2001, 11-12) explains, this also creates a false separation between theory and praxis. Wane adds that the effects of this kind of knowledge — in schools and in universities — is an alienation from oneself and one's body, because it takes place "within the context of a history of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial conditionalities" (2008, 193). In our online reading group, we address this by employing practices such as questioning each other, providing alternative views and encouraging the sharing of experiences and/or any other kind of marginalised knowledge that may include knowledge from the oral archives. To illustrate, in analysing a poem on female genital mutilation through the lens of Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) Stiwanism (a branch of African Feminism: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), we interrogated the role of "*Dede*" (first-born girl or daughter in Ghana) in the

ritual. Our analysis included a vibrant discussion on masculinity and patriarchal representation in rituals from different African countries and communities. Through this discussion, we were able to draw from different oral and linguistic archives to create parallels between "*Dede*" and "*rakhali*/*rakgadi*" (paternal aunt in Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa) in our efforts to understand the language of the poem, particularly in setting the stage for a military interpretation of moving in a file towards doom. Our analysis brought to life what Magoqwana and Maseko (2023, 394) regard as "a process of valuing maternal legacies of African women through all forms of archives."

This example provides insight into our discussions, demonstrating how practices that recognise and welcome a range of different bodies and ways of being and knowing are instrumental in contesting alterity and affirming endogeneity — "an intellectual standpoint derived from a rootedness in the African conditions" (Adesina 2008, 135). Alternatively, it demonstrates how the informality of the space contributes to affirming endogeneity as members are comfortable to engage at the level that makes use of "verbal documents" or orality, as defined by Oyeniyi (2021).

Cultivating radical care in and beyond the virtual space

The *African Feminist Reading Group* is more than an online intellectual engagement with the scholarly work of African women. The intentional space we have created is also focused on connecting with each other, inspired by a shared interest in African Feminisms, shared values of empathy and a desire to inspire individual and continental liberation. Adomako Ampofo explains that keeping a focus on core feminist goals is vital considering the distractions of "the exigencies of life" and that "ultimately it is only possible to maintain one's strength as a feminist scholar and activist through constant reflection, both personal and communal" (2010, 28). This kind of reflection in our reading group is indeed a way to build our strength, as we engage each other and use African Feminisms to unpack our scholarship, activism and citizenship in the shared online space. In a higher education context where Black women's intellectual and emotional labour continues to be marginalised, overlooked and overworked for a variety of reasons (Bamberg et al. 2021; Okech 2020; Kiguwa 2019; Swartz et al. 2018),

they nevertheless find ways to support, care and nourish each other. What has heartened us in this unfolding is the extent to which the intellectual work we do is charged and permeated with emotional and political embodiment, held together with radical care.

Radical care incorporates and overlaps with a number of ideas: *ubuntu* as an African orientation of mutual constitution; interconnectedness and interdependence (Tamale 2020); *feminist humanism* as a "socio-centric ethos" concerned with collective liberation and justice (Steady 2011, cited by Nkealah 2022); *feminist humaneness* (Nkealah 2022) which is described as unconditional "care and kindness" to those in need; and finally, *self-care* (McFadden 2021). McFadden speaks of "stepping away" from the noise of "gendered nationalism" as a profoundly conscious act of self-care and reconstruction of her life and "to craft new imaginaries of feminist freedom" (2021, 297). The need to take care of ourselves, and finding solidarity with each other, are regular imperatives that are accommodated in the space. There are times when members of the group step away from our engagements to focus on other things and are welcomed back warmly when they return. All these ways of being are relational and radical because they are intentional and conscious praxes of caring towards social justice. The introductory conversations set a tone for a more holistic engagement with each other — whether this is about South African electricity woes which sometimes disrupt our scheduled time or prevent people from attending, or workloads, or family concerns, we are cognisant that each member is more than their thoughts and words. Even silences, as Chigumadzi (2021) argues are important signifiers and ways of communicating and sometimes lead to an individual comment on the Zoom chat function or a follow up afterwards to ask if someone is okay. The kindness and concern expressed during the session or after is a demonstration of the kind of radical care that is a political act of resistance to neo-liberal values in our institutions, where, as MacFadden (2018) points out, our responses to "patriarchal violence" become "habitual".

Radical care is not paternalistic — rather, it is the kind of non-hierarchical relationship reminiscent of the *ubuntu* we subscribe to in the reading group. Bamberg et al. (2021) explain five aspects of radical care: *attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity.* We feel a synergy with these ideas and have explained how our gatherings have a focus on connections

with each other, creating a space where people can bring their unfiltered selves and concerns and sometimes even their children to the online space where they are unconditionally welcomed. The praxis of *attentiveness* is experienced as a reaching and an offering across a virtual divide to engage holistically, aligned to Hames' "Getting to know each other sessions" (2021, 65) which recognised and accommodated the differences in backgrounds and experiences. We come from different countries and experiences in our reading group, and when we speak, our words are signs of the embodiment of the knowledge that has impacted and changed us. Accordingly, the way that we learn from each other and from the texts we engage with, become part of who we are collectively and individually — we are constituted by each other and the African Feminisms with which we work. Examples of how this happens include the friendships that have developed inside and outside of the reading group; and the ways in which we can learn from each other by presenting our own work for discussion in the group. In an intentional feminist onto-epistemic community, how we know and are known can be transformational, as we are attentive and entangled in each other's journeys and experiences. This kind of holistic and relational attentiveness expands us — we would be poorer without it.

The attentiveness is expanded by the *responsibility* that we take on in how we relate. Collins argues that this kind of openness to knowing each other as we seek transformational knowledge brings with it an "ethic of personal accountability" (2003, 63). In our reading group, we have found that this sense of accountability and the navigation of power relationships based on historical constructions of race, age, gender, ethnicity, class etc. have been transformative. It has meant having difficult conversations about the terminology we use, which may carry negative connotations (such as "third world" or "people of colour"), sparking thought-provoking discussions as members expressed their unease with these labels. Like the South African-based *Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group*, ours provides a space for African Feminist intimacy and building of a supportive onto-epistemic community that is welcoming of difference, debate and discomfort (Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani 2022, 4).

Doing this work, and seeing it done in our group by others, helps us to develop *competence,* not only in the range of our empathy, but in our understanding of ourselves as competent researchers and thinkers. The warm reactions and

critical advice establish a space where it is safe to be vulnerable — either leading to people sharing their fears or experiences or sharing their own scholarly work for discussion. Over time, this grows into a *responsiveness*, where we can think ahead, and be present to address the needs of each other — either during our group sessions, or afterwards in the form of relevant papers being sent to each other, or communication around issues raised in the group. Finally, we build *solidarity* as part of a collective consciousness and responsibility to receive and give care to each other and the wider society.

This comes against the awareness of how contemporary feminist calls for sisterhood have been soured by Black women's experiences of betrayal by white feminists, and the histories of mistrust, exploitation and appropriation of Black women's intellectual labour (hooks 1994,102). Indeed, we are not naïve to the problematic nature of transnational feminist solidarity, its ethical dilemmas, susceptibility to the prevailing North/South or white/Black dichotomies and associated epistemic extractivism — and indeed at different times, we as a group have confronted and navigated some of these tendencies. In this, we draw on Okech and Musindarwezo's (2019) advice in our pursuit of reflexive transnational feminist praxis where we remain ever cautious of how race, class and heteronormative logics work to sustain differential power hierarchies in transnational solidarities. Accordingly, our effort to construct friendship and radical care within a feminist sisterhood made up of white, Black, young, old, queer and straight women is conscious of the need to build meaningful ties that avoid the replication of the servant-served, victim-saviour and colonised-coloniser paradigms within dominant scholarship and praxis. Our reflections in the group have included some honest discussions around how we are differently located in historical legacies of oppression, and how, through sharing our experiences in the group, we are able to understand each other and provide the necessary support.

Within this virtual, trans-boundary and transdisciplinary space, we do our best to ensure that everyone feels seen and every voice is heard. This manifests in how we assign the rotational facilitation of meetings, readings and discussions within the group. A consensus is built to continue with discussion, if need be, based on comments/questions that may have emerged in the chat facility or in talking through an issue. The chat facility provides us with an additional layer of interaction that allows members to share their insights or any other relevant

resources to the discussion without interrupting or waiting their turn to speak. As a secondary channel of communication, the chat facility enhances engagement, even in instances where members may initially be hesitant to speak up verbally: at times out of concern about potentially disrupting ongoing discussions with a contribution that is essentially meant to be banked for future discussions, while at other times out of preference to maintain control over the communication of their ideas by carefully selecting words to use. This contributes to generation of ideas and making the space more inclusive in that it allows us to be reflexive in our praxis.

Discussion on Unanticipated Benefits and Lessons

A significant development from the *African Feminist Reading Group* has been the continued nurturing of connections and collaborations even outside of the group. Members have found in each other critical readers, co-authors of manuscripts, co-presenters of conference papers and friendships based on conversations in the group. A few months after the start of the group, the two founding members applied to run a short course as part of the annual Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS) Spring Into Methods doctoral seminars. Crucial to this application was the successful advocacy for the inclusion of an equal number of African graduates to participate in the free, online course. Around 40 PhD students from Scotland and other parts of the UK, Ghana, South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe participated, all of whom were invited to join the reading group after the completion of the course.

The SGSSS doctoral course, and other collaborations and projects that have emerged from among group members, are a testament to how such informal platforms for alternative onto-epistemologies can be transformative for the formal knowledges legitimised in universities. The course synthesised the learnings from the reading group — the creation of diasporic communities; using the virtual platform to establish holistic connections; and cultivating radical care. Some of the participants in this course who joined the reading group remain some of the most regular members to this day. African Feminisms, as marginal as they are in the traditional hierarchies of knowledge, are gaining traction and disrupting the hegemonic canon through popular education and the scholarly

works they influence: the courses we are running, papers we are writing and performances we are producing. There have been and will, hopefully, continue to be other collaborations through the platform of the reading group that illustrate how informal spaces, when operating with the intention of transformation and connection, can equally lead to robust and supported contributions in the formal education sector.

We are in conversation in the group about how to respond to oppressions in the university system, perhaps in the form of a letter to all universities. We look forward to the time when our solidarity results in acts of advocacy that could have an effect beyond the borders of our group. Embracing vulnerability has also taught us the importance of recasting anger as part of this process. Rather than being labelled as angry Black women, we have acquired a deeper understanding that anger can empower us, as indicated by Audre Lorde during her 1981 keynote address at the National Women's Studies Association Conference. Specifically, we have grasped the essence of her statement that: "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty" (Lorde 1997, 281).

In our reading group, we have found a sense of freedom in expressing our ideas without the pressure of over-theorising or over-explaining their legitimacy. This space has allowed us to share our thoughts in their raw and unfiltered form, while still being mindful of each other's differences. Rather than reducing epistemic rigour in these practices, we find a liberation into expanded and humanised ways of knowing and being, conscientised by the experiences and insights we share (Freire 1970).

Embracing vulnerability has been a crucial lesson for us, as it allows us to reflect creatively and critically on diverse knowledges, learn from different perspectives and willingly receive feedback and comments on our work. Through our engagement with vulnerability, discomfort and the sisterhood we have nurtured over the years, we hope we have illustrated how reading groups such as ours, which are grounded in African Feminisms, can be used not just as sites for resisting dominant approaches to knowledge creation and pedagogy, but as spaces for healing and building feminist solidarity. This act of theorising vulnerability, healing and resistance at the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality and disability have since been identified as foundational to

non-Western feminisms and scholarship, where lived experiences situated at the margins fuse to create theory in the flesh, which urge women of colour to create a praxis that enables healing, survival and resistances (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Anzaldúa 1987).

Conclusion

The *African Feminist Reading Group* that we discuss here is an example of how our intentional praxis of African Feminist principles in the group has led to the kinds of learning and transformation that, in our experiences, are perhaps not always possible in more formal settings. The group has grown to include diasporic scholars and encouraged intercontinental collaborations through its operations. The radical care, spirituality, recognition and solidarity we experience speak to and transform our being in the world in profound ways. We show how this informal online platform, the *African Feminist Reading Group*, falls within the parameters of a Pan-Africanist popular education, offering and enhancing formal educational contributions and efforts that are motivated by the same intentions. Interestingly, the group has also led to politically and emotionally rigorous contributions to mainstream education, in the form of courses run, papers written and presentations at academic conferences. Our PhDs and formal article writing have been strengthened through us being able to open these to loving critique in the group; and we have co-developed a course that is the praxis of African Feminist pedagogy. The virtual platform that we use has had the effect of establishing and sustaining connections between people who, despite many differences, are connected through African Feminist transformational ideas and principles. Coming, as we do, from different African countries and the diaspora, what we learn in the online reading group inspires our contributions, activism and citizenship in these various locations, in small but meaningful steps in the direction of the Pan-Africanist ideal of continental liberation and justice.

We posit that the advancement of feminist epistemic communities through digital technology helps to valorise orality in knowledge production and recognise the potential of oral traditions as legitimate forms of generating, preserving and sharing knowledge. This emphasis on orality has been an important way to recognise and honour what we bring with us to the group — not only through

what we say, but through stories and metaphors that have been passed on to us and that we share in the group to expand on our understanding of the text. When these are shared, the group becomes permeated with the holistic spirituality and connection with our elders and ancestors as members expand on the text to include other ways of knowing, supporting what Motsemme (2004, 910) claims: "when we reject dominant western oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech, and instead adopt frameworks where words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field, we find that the mute always speak". In this way, digital technology enables unanticipated and expanded connections across space and time that are supportive and inspirational in theory and practice.

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Women's Mobilisation and Activism for Peace in Cameroon

Asanda-Jonas Benya speaks with Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo

In this interview, Asanda-Jonas Benya (AB) speaks to Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo (EA), a scholar and feminist activist based in Cameroon. Since the war in Cameroon broke out in 2017, Eileen has been active in women's peacebuilding activism in the South West and North West Women's Task Force (SNWOT). Below, she takes us through the work that women have been doing to bring about peace in the country. The background to the mobilisation efforts of the SNWOT women can be traced back to the "Anglophone Crisis" which started in 2016. This crisis was sparked off by a series of protests by Anglophone lawyers against the appointment of a majority of Francophone magistrates to Anglophone courts. Anglophone teachers later joined these protests to demand reforms, especially regarding the educational system. Though the government tried to address these concerns through a commission it set up, the protests continued and later turned into demands by some members of the Anglophone public, for a separate state. A violent conflict broke out on the first of October 2017 between non-state actors in the Anglophone Regions and state military and structures. The women of Cameroon that Eileen is a part of came together under SNWOT. They work across Cameroon and have been involved in public demonstrations calling on different parties to silence the guns and resume peace talks. Most notably, SNWOT has facilitated dialogues to bring peace to the war-affected regions. Critical dialogues and popular education within the group and with other actors are some of the tools the SNWOT women use to facilitate teaching and learning, as well as their advocacy and mediation work. Below, Eileen gives us some background on their formation, work, and the lessons that they have learned.

AB: Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.

EA: I am called Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo. I have a PhD in Mass Communications from the University of Buea, Cameroon and an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies with Journalism and Mass Communication. I joined public service in 2006 as a volunteer with the Regional Delegation of Women's Empowerment and the Family. In 2008, I joined the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Buea as a part-time lecturer until 2022, when I moved to the University of Bamenda, Department of Communication and Development. During these 16 years of teaching, I have constantly remained committed to my activism for women's empowerment. I believe in causes that promote and protect women and girls. As a resource person, I have conducted training on gender-based violence (GBV), Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA), women and peacebuilding, as well as women and leadership. One thing I hold dear is the right to my voice and the freedom to express it, and I try in all spaces, especially in the classroom, to encourage young girls to express their opinions and occupy spaces that rightfully belong to them and defend causes that they believe in, despite the challenges they may face.

AB: Please elaborate on your work with the women peace activists.

EA: My call for women's peace activism in 2018 saw me join the South West North West Women's Task Force (SNWOT). This task force was formed to engage women in peacebuilding in the two Anglophone regions in Cameroon in response to violence that started in 2017, and led to killings, kidnappings and massive displacement of women and children. I brought my communication skills to the Task Force, and, together with other women, we carried out public demonstrations calling for peace. We held press conferences and engaged in other advocacy activities with government and non-state actors demanding dialogue and a cease-fire. Over the years, we have extended our advocacy to diplomatic bodies, international NGOs and Separatist leadership in the diaspora to negotiate for security for women and school children. We have sought to push for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Cameroon, which includes participation and representation, prevention, protection, relief and recovery. Women are often inadequately represented in top leadership

positions, so their interests are not considered when decisions affecting their lives are made. For instance, during the Major National Dialogue (MND), only 15% of participants were women.

This number was attained through the forceful participation of uninvited SNWOT members in the dialogue. The President of Cameroon called the MND in response to repeated calls for peace in the face of escalating violence in the North West and South West Regions. Led by the Prime Minister, the MND was held in Yaounde, and delegates from the ten regions were invited to participate. However, when we looked at the criteria for participation (Ministers, Governors, Divisional Officers, parliamentarians, political leaders, religious leaders, traditional leaders and business leaders), women were immediately disadvantaged because very few were represented in those roles.

AB: What prompted the formation of the group?

EA: The current political and geographic state of Cameroon was created by the unification of East and Southern Cameroons in 1961. France colonised East Cameroon, while Southern Cameroon was under the British. Following protests for independence, Southern Cameroon joined East Cameroon in a federation of two equal states. However, politically, Southern Cameroon lost its status and is today counted as two regions out of ten, eight French-speaking. In 2016, following calls for reforms from lawyers and teachers, there was a widespread boycott of courts and classrooms in the Anglophone Regions. This led to calls for secession and the eventual outbreak of violence in 2017 when non-state actors took up arms, counter-attacking government forces. This led to killings, kidnappings and displacement of thousands of Anglophones who fled to other regions of Cameroon and to neighbouring Nigeria.

In 2018, the group was formed in response to the need to end the violence that had caused misery to women and children. A lot of men were killed, others arrested, houses burnt and women raped. The women of the North West and South West Cameroon faced a new reality of insecurity and increased household burdens as men and boys either joined the fighters in the bushes or escaped to neighbouring countries for fear of arrests. Women faced further harsh realities of children being killed or kidnapped on their way to school. We lived in constant

fear, always ready to rush to school to pick up kids when the shooting started. 2017 was a terrible year for us: we had never experienced anything like this before. There were times when we were compelled to stay at home for weeks during lockdowns imposed by non-state actors. During this period, some women and girls suffered increased GBV at home. Both military and non-state actors raped many women. There was constant fear because of the prolonged conflict. Over 60,000 civilians from the affected regions (the majority women) fled to neighbouring Nigeria, and many more remained internally displaced within Cameroon. The media frequently reported on stranded women and children in different cities who were exposed to sexual exploitation and abuse. As the military option was not yielding any useful results, the women saw that the violence was too much, so they decided to come together to call for peace.

AB: How did you start mobilising as women in Cameroon?

EA: By 2018, different women groups started talking about peace, but it took a few of them, led by Mme Omam Esther, to insist on forming a women's task force for the North West and South West. Supported by the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), a mini peace convention was organised in the South West Region. This brought together civil society women leaders from both regions, who became a springboard for setting up the task force. I joined the mobilisation efforts at this time, and activities took off immediately after that. The immediate focus of the task force was humanitarian aid, especially to all levels of displaced women. Thereafter, we called for a public demonstration termed the "lamentation campaigns" which brought together thousands of women from both regions for a public lamentation.

AB: Do you work across the entire country or in some regions?

EA: The task force was designed to address the North West and South West conflict. However, over the years, we have aligned with other coalitions where we work in all parts of Cameroon affected by conflict. Our primary focus as SNWOT is the North West and South West regions, but because we are a part of the National Women's Convention for Peace, we get involved in the far North, for instance, because of the ongoing Boko Haram, as well as in the East refugee crisis.

AB: What programmes/projects do you focus on?

EA: When we started in 2018, we focused on public demonstrations. We organised two lamentation campaigns in Buea and Bamenda that cumulatively mobilised about 2000 women to call for a cease-fire. After this, we had two other demonstrations: we mobilised women to confront the Prime Minister, who visited Buea and Bamenda for peace talks with different groups. Then, we held a press conference calling on government and non-state actors to drop their guns and end hostilities. However, we soon realised that public events did not translate into meaningful gains: for instance, women were hardly included in dialogue spaces where pertinent decisions were made about the peace process. We, therefore, started advocacy for women's inclusion in such spaces. However, due to the limited capacity of many women to participate and own such spaces while making meaningful and strategic contributions, we turned to capacity building. Swisspeace, a strategic partner, supported this process technically and financially so that SNWOT members could acquire skills in conflict analysis, leadership, dialogue facilitation, advocacy and mediation, and many other subjects.

We also engaged in online activism through Twitter (now X), where we organised weekly conversations on women and peacebuilding, targeting non-state actors who could not physically participate in our local demonstrations. SNWOT is currently in the final stages of publishing a peacebuilding manual. The manual will provide women in rural communities with the necessary skills and strategies to participate in and lead local peacebuilding/grassroots mediation processes.

AB: Can you say more about the popular education aspect and general learning space you have co-created as the women of Cameroon?

EA: The creation of SNWOT was a collective process from the get-go. We started by developing a charter to guide the activities of the group. This was new to many women, but, by working together, we learned from one another. This has been the process in SNWOT – group work, primarily online, where group members work collectively on a subject, self-critique the work and make suitable changes. A lot was also learnt by merely seeing how other women performed within the space. We used every opportunity to hold meetings and plan. For instance, hotel rooms quickly became conference spaces, especially at night when we had to

strategise quickly for the next day's activities. Restaurants were also transformed into meeting spaces. This is because we all come from different places, and when we can physically meet, we maximise that physical meeting to the utmost.

Beyond these informal spaces, SNWOT constantly sought funding to build women's capacities specifically in the peacebuilding arena: for example, lobbying and advocacy, project writing and leadership. We also organised self-care events where women gathered to spend time together and help one another overcome the trauma and pain of the war. Online spaces have been used for meetings, planning sessions and in-house trainings on subjects, such as movement building, which are essential for activism engagements.

AB: In what ways is learning in these spaces facilitated?

EA: Through storytelling. Women have learnt a lot by listening to each other's stories and the stories of more experienced sisters within the space. Swisspeace's support facilitated this by organising capacity-building sessions and our Annual General Assembly. SNWOT comprises women from the North West and South West Region. These two distinct cultural groups have interethnic conflicts – working together as women did not automatically remove the biases between the two groups. In some of our sessions, we engaged in intercultural dialogue by inviting members to share their experiences working with the other group within the space. This led to deep confessions of frustration, anger and pain inflicted by derogatory expressions arising from cultural differences. For instance, sisters of one tribe were called lazy, while the others were called aggressive and greedy. These periods of sharing also gave room for intergenerational dialogue. SNWOT has young women within its ranks, and they also shared how they felt they were treated in the group. These particular themes were chosen to build group harmony and peace from within. Without building harmony, political actors who use divisive narratives to promote their political interests could easily destroy the coalition.

AB: What have been some of the biggest lessons for all of you?

EA: Teamwork and leadership. Many women came into the space without understanding what it meant to work together or lead a process. Many of these women were civil society leaders, but they mostly worked in silos, heading their organisations and running individual projects. This was the first time they came together across political, cultural and religious divides to work for a common goal – peace. It was not easy at the beginning because leaders had to learn to follow others in that space. After more than five years, many who came in without organisations have emerged as leaders in their own right. Many have learnt to put personal grievances aside to achieve a common goal. Despite heated arguments within the group, it has never affected the group's capacity to speak with one voice on our primary issue of concern: the return to peace in the North-West and South-West.

AB: How has SNWOT changed things on the ground or helped organise women, amplify their voices, etc.?

EA: When SNWOT started, there were virtually no women's coalitions advocating for peace in Cameroon. Today, we have over six women-led peacebuilding networks in both regions and a national women's convention for peace that won the 2023 German Africa Award – the first time it was awarded to a group. Women have engaged in peace processes across the country, and their representation in processes, though dismal, is better than it was before we started advocacy for peace.

AB: Are there histories of women's resistance in Cameroon that you draw on? What are those histories or women?

EA: In Cameroon, the Anlu women of Kom are in the North West Region. This was a women's network traditionally used to punish those perceived to have gone against social/cultural norms. They were particularly active between 1958 and 1961 in the fight for independence when about 6,000 women mobilised to disrupt colonial administrative processes. Their collective votes gave victory to the KNDP Party, which supported reunification with La Republique du Cameroun.

Beyond the Anlu women, we also draw from the Takumbeng women, a group of older women considered to have natural authority by virtue of their age and status as mothers. The Takumbeng come out publicly to curse or cleanse the land and its people when something very bad has occurred. The appearance of the Takumbeng is often feared because they would strip naked and curse whoever has gone against accepted social norms. Today, there's a Takumbeng worldwide that seeks to bring women together under a platform for advocacy. Culturally, women's groups remain strong, though not as active. Many politicians seek to instrumentalise these groups, which reduces their capacity to speak with authority.

AB: Do you link up with other women's groups outside Cameroon?

EA: SNWOT has collaborated with other women's groups out of the country for training and experience sharing. In the group's early years, it invited women from the Central African Republic and Chad to share their experiences of women's mobilising in peace processes. Some members have also visited Colombia to share their peace journey and learn the Colombian story. Extensive interactions are, however, limited due to cost implications. The Nobel Prize winner for Peace, Leymah Gbowee, visited Cameroon and held sessions with SNWOT to share the Liberian experience and strategies for women to advocate for peace effectively. These cross-border learning platforms have enabled the task force to visualise a road map to peace, identify actors and strategies to advocate for a cease-fire and network for resources to support women's participation in peace processes. In November 2023, five coalition members travelled to Canada to participate in a Southern Cameroon Conference. They narrated to participants women's roles in peacebuilding all backed by the incredible work that the coalition has been doing since 2018.

AB: Is there anything else you would like to highlight regarding popular education, feminism, women's resistance, visibility, and pan-Africanism?

EA: Women's resistance is often a natural response to a crisis. When there seems to be no solution, women stand up to act, often with little else besides passion and conviction. This activism appears to be driven more by the need

for survival, not just for themselves but primarily for their children. This is a significant incentive to drive the momentum for women to engage in processes; however, is it enough to define the direction they take once they become a part of the process? The general idea I have gained through these years is that once there is peace, women will fall back into their expected roles of mothers and wives and leave the rest to the men. Therefore, women in peacebuilding must be guided by the general notions of peace both during conflict and during peace. We need to see the bigger picture of the need for women to collaborate across all spaces and collate women's knowledge that defines women's well-being at all times and in all circumstances. Women must see themselves as women, not as attachments to men, children or their families. They need to understand that processes must be specifically designed to work for women as primary beneficiaries, not secondary. This knowledge will lead women peacebuilders to a better understanding of feminism and how interconnected feminist resistance is with women's activism for peace.

Biography

Eileen Manka Tabuwe Akwo is a multidisciplinary scholar whose research and work interconnect gender, communication, conflict and peacebuilding. She lectures in communication and development at the University of Bamenda. She is also a peace activist. She holds a PhD in Mass Communication (communication and conflict) from the University of Buea, Cameroon. In her work she leverages communication as a tool to break barriers for women across digital spaces, peacebuilding spaces and all development initiatives. She is consistent in her drive to contextualise women within media/technology, revealing patterns of inequality and highlighting opportunities for change and growth.

Reconnecting Experiences to Politics: *Purposeful* in Conversation

Boikanyo Modungwa speaks with Dr Ramatu Bangura and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli

It is imperative for those doing social justice work to go through their own personal journeys of liberation. Realising our feminist visions of what our communities and the world could and should be is not possible without these journeys – feminist popular education plays an essential role in sparking and nurturing this journey. In February 2023, ***Purposeful***, an Africa-rooted feminist hub for girls' organising and activism (headquartered in Sierra Leone) brought together its team for a week of feminist popular education in Ghana. The purpose of this retreat was to provide the team with political grounding, to learn from each other and to reflect collectively upon and interrogate the systems of oppression that define the world we live in.

The retreat was designed and facilitated by two close allies of ***Purposeful***: Dr Ramatu Bangura and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli. This conversation was held with the intention of unearthing, documenting and sharing the importance of holding popular education spaces for teams working on social justice, particularly African feminist organisations. The conversation, held in April 2023, was facilitated and edited for flow and succinctness by Boikanyo Modungwa.

Boikanyo Modungwa (BM): ***Purposeful*** is committed to feminist education. We have Radical Reading: a virtual space facilitated by team members (where we engage with feminist texts) to unpack theory and discuss how it connects to the work we do and our ways of being. We also have Feminist Night School where participants get an opportunity to connect with the theories and practices of liberation, analysing the conditions of girls and women's oppression and connecting their challenges with herstories of justice organising through the ages. So, although I was not surprised by the design and content of our retreat, I had not experienced a team retreat like it; instead of the usual strategic and work planning discussions, our retreat was grounding us in the history and the politics of our work.

But before we get into discussing the retreat, let's start with introductions of the people who designed and co-facilitated it. Please introduce yourselves. Do you identify as pan-African feminists?

Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli (ZMM): My first identity is that of a feminist. I'm an African feminist. And I think it implies that I'm pan-Africanist, because I don't know how to be an African feminist without a pan-Africanist leaning. So, while I rarely say I'm a pan-Africanist, for me it is implied. I'm very much also a Black, African feminist. So, depending on where I am, I say I'm a Black African feminist. It just does not make sense to my African sisters when I say that, so I kind of bracket the Black. It's like, 'well, what else would you be?' And of course, I've run for political office [1995, 1999 – Zurich, Switzerland].

Ramatu Bangura (RB): I identify as a Black feminist. I believe in a global pan-African notion of African-ness. So, I'm an African of the diaspora, I'm Sierra Leonean-Nigerian slash Ghanaian slash, whatever else is in the mix of my family background. I've come from people who have moved over and over for generations, and I don't think those movements – whether forced or by choice– should threaten my African-ness. But I identify as a Black feminist, as an African woman. I am a strategist, activist scholar, and I'm a mother. My current political identity and work is very much informed by my experience of being a mother. But it's also being in space with young feminists, being clear about my commitment to Africa and Black people and anybody trying to seek liberation in the system in which we exist.

BM: The first part of our conversation is really to understand how you define popular education and whether you would describe the team retreat with ***Purposeful*** in Ghana as a week of popular education.

RB: It was definitely popular education: taking daily lived experiences, and supporting folks in placing them in a political context, in the context of the systems that harm and showing them that:

- their experience is valid and important,
- the thing that you have experienced in encountering these systems, these harmful systems, is not your experience alone,
- it is by design that you were harmed in this way and finally,
- That there is value in collectivising with others who have also been harmed in this way to shift and change that system.

The goal is to remind people that what they are experiencing is not some personal failure or lack of virtue, but rather that systems have been designed to have them feel this way, and that if we collectivise, we can resist, but you have to be first grounded in that experience and understand what's happening. So, to me, if I remember correctly from my studies of Paulo Freire, that is popular education at its core.

Often, the way we talk about things makes people feel like they have to have a Master's degree in Critical Studies to be able to even begin to talk about these systems. And it locks out the ***Purposeful*** team, a team of mostly young African feminists who are brilliant and smart, and who are survivors of the systemic gendered and sexualised violence. With that, the only way they're allowed to show up on global platforms, is in their pain, in talking about how they've been harmed, but very rarely are they invited to talk about it in a critical way around the power systems that are embedded in this, and how they themselves approached it and their tactics and strategies. So, what we wanted to do was to reconnect these young women's experiences to their politics. And if we can connect that experience of living to your analysis, then we've done something. And I think what we're doing right now as a sector, as a field, as movements, is we're separating people from their experiences. People talk with a whole lot of authority about things they don't know, because they can talk about it intellectually, but they don't have a visceral experience of that. So, I want them [***Purposeful*** team] to have an opportunity to connect that visceral experience to their political analysis, and how they show up in their work.

And so what we wanted to do was to just be in a space with these young women and reconnect their politics to their experience, and be clear that we don't have to say to them, "this is the experience of structural oppression, this is the

experience of patriarchy, this is the experience of racism, this is the experience of colonialism, and heterosexism, and homophobia" they are already living it.

ZMM: Yes, we anchored the design of the retreat in not just the personal experiences, but in also understanding that there's been a whole lot of things happening historically to bring us to how things are today. Emphasising this by visiting some of the critical spaces where some of this nonsense kicked off, like those forts [slave trade castles], it just fit in so well because that was then left for everyone to do their own brain work. We didn't come back and unpack or re-analyse the whole thing. It was a good combination of practice, theory and self-reflection, if you will. And I think that's how to do this work, by letting people know, "your experience is very valid, you are an expert, you don't have to go and bring some three letters after your name to say you are able and you are competent enough".

It was also essential that we create a space that was nurturing, something safe where people could be vulnerable. There was a lot of care involved in planning and carrying out the retreat and that was received well. I am curious as to what the team's reflection would be in a year. I really felt personally invested in it. And I loved it. There was the whole notion of care and nurture that was put on the ground, and it continued to nurture itself and be self-growing, equipping the team with lifelong skills of critical thought and reflection.

BM: Why is it important for those doing feminist programmatic or funding work with and for girls and young women to "go through their own journeys of liberation"?

RB: I think there are multiple journeys of liberation for this group, especially for those of us educated in colonial systems; there is a need to release the earnestness about the "goodness" or neutrality of those institutions. I do love the opportunity to reflect and be critical of the training that only former colonial subjects seem to get around how to behave and how to show up and what success looks like. Being freed up from that is, in and of itself, a form of liberation. And, as we talked about earlier, that process of linking your lived experience to your political analysis, is an act of liberation, because you're no longer beholden to notions of how to be successful in these oppressive systems. How do you, for lack of

a better term, be a "good Black", in systems that are designed to kill you, to diminish you, to degrade you? If you no longer feel beholden to that system for your survival, even as you depend on it for your income, then your mind has found some liberation from the need to perform in a particular way to be good. You may perform in that way to get paid; you may perform in that way to feed your children and take care of your family, but your mind isn't wrapped up in the success of performing whatever you have to perform to be successful. African feminists in philanthropy and development spaces often have to hold this double consciousness, working within systems that they are not necessarily aligned with, but having to do so to earn a living. So, I think that's one critical form of liberation.

ZMM: I think it's important for them to go through their own journeys of liberation for two reasons. One is professional and the other one's personal, right? The work we do, we're kind of in the "business of change". And if we want to bring about change, we must be aware, first of all, of what needs changing. And I think, the first instance is usually us.

I think liberation comes from when you reach a point of saying, "You know what, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I don't know who the hell I really am. I need to find out, I need to make a plan, I need to move somewhere". Professionally, I feel we are obliged to do that. We will not bring about change if we don't find that liberation. You know, at ***Purposeful***, the notion of saying we're giving money to girls, we're not asking for any reports, we're not asking them to justify how they have used the funds. That's very liberating to say, we are going to start believing in a group of people, who, based on our upbringing as "good Black people or members of the colonial apparatus" we should not be trusting.

I think everyone is obliged to go through some personal revolution. Really, we have to be even a bit nasty to ourselves sometimes, because we sit in very cozy comforts, and we're not aware of them. So questioning things like our privilege… basically, a revolution is necessary for liberation. Mindset change is necessary for our work. And mindset change is necessary for us to grow, to even just have personal growth and shake off some of our mind maps. This is a foundation to pan-African feminist popular education: a freeing of our minds, "disrupting our colonial minds", as a pathway to the liberation of ourselves and the girls across the globe that ***Purposeful*** hopes to transform the world with and for.

BM: This reminds me of something I heard you say at the Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights last year [2022] Zeedah, that stuck with me: that we cannot liberate ourselves, if we do not know what we're liberating ourselves from, and the retreat discussions were very successful in clarifying what we're liberating ourselves from. What were some of the most crucial elements that informed the design of the retreat so that it can be a journey of or a space for liberation?

RB: I think there was a desire to give the gift of space. Natalie Collier often says that the thing that survivors, that Black women, don't get (and she speaks from the perspective of a Black woman in the Deep South of the United States), what some Black women don't get, what Black survivors of violence don't often get is space and time. And that was the gift, at least for me. I saw something I wanted to offer to this team as a gift: to say, here's time for you to just be the thought leaders, the thinkers, the activists that you are and have space to just have conversations and be with each other. And not have it be solely about producing.

ZMM: So, for me, there were the elements I talked about before, the care. I was working with somebody [Ramatu] who cares deeply about ***Purposeful***. I love ***Purposeful***, but Ramatu's relationship with ***Purposeful***, given the role she has played in the early years of the organisation to today, is even spiritual. And that's what would make a difference with another facilitator. If that heart is not there, if it's just going to be neck up, it could go horribly wrong, but this was a combination of head and heart.

RB: We went in with an ethic of play, and not in like… a frivolous way, but really like anything's possible. Let's try something. There was an element of comfort in knowing, or feeling, like I knew the organisation, even as I was still getting to know the team. Zeedah also has done extensive work with ***Purposeful***, so both of us having intimate knowledge of the workings, the challenges, the things they do really well helped quite a bit. For me, it was important that the group left the retreat feeling triumphant. They were going into ***Purposeful's*** fifth year celebration. The reason why ***Purposeful*** is successful is, in large part, due to the work of this team. And so, I wanted them to feel triumphant. I wanted this to feel a little bit, not luxurious, but a little bit self-indulgent. Rosa ***[Purposeful*** co-founder and co-CEO] kept saying, "this isn't like a typical retreat, where you come in, you have strategy, you're looking at your work plans". It was a space

to really be thinkers and scholars together. And to have that push and pull on each other when we have conversations; I think what was unique to ***Purposeful*** about this was that there is a culture here of debate.

On one of the days, I watched a small group of ***Purposeful*** staff have an intergenerational argument. Chernor [***Purposeful*** co-founder and former co-CEO] and one of the very junior team members, a fellow, were at the centre of this debate. It was loud and raucous, but it was done in a loving way. I watched and I was like, "Oh, they can do this [have difficult conversations]". So, I remember saying to Zeedah that we need to rework the rest of the agenda.

ZMM: Yeah, there's this fundamental trust amongst them. They trust each other despite their differences.

RB: Whereas some institutions cannot hold that kind of difference, there was a power to me in that capacity. The [former] co-CEO is an older man, you're a younger member of the team, who isn't fully staff yet, who may aspire to be one, and you still felt like you could argue with him. You could take him on, and he was able to be taken on and your job wasn't threatened. You weren't going to be cancelled. There was no threat. There was no ego. And she's now a staff member. I don't think every organisation is set up to do that. I think we have a culture of penalty, of relational consequences that come out of disagreement. And not to say that ***Purposeful*** is perfect in that respect, I'm intimately involved in ***Purposeful's*** organisational development where I know there are challenges but, at the same time, I know that this is rare in the space that we are in.

Because of the heated discussion [between the (former) co-CEO and the younger person], I was like, "So we can debate." We reworked that last day based on that debate, to that fishbowl. Everybody did the spectrum and then people had to jump in and debate and we saw how heated and active that got. It created an opportunity for members of the team to express their own views on sex work, the age of consent, FGM and so on. I don't think every organisation is set up to do it.

BM: Yes, that debate really reminded me of how the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists defines feminist leadership: particularly, openness to critique, a commitment to nurture and support young feminists in a non-matronising/patronising manner and a commitment to building and

expanding the team's knowledge on an ongoing basis to shape their analysis and strategies used in our work (African Feminist Forum, 2007).

I can't close this discussion without your reflections on the sessions. We had:

- ***Purposeful* collective storytelling,** which involved a recounting of the origins of the organisation and how it has evolved;
- **Getting to the root – disrupting our colonial minds,** which consisted of grounding lectures on systems of oppression, from racism to sexism, followed by team discussions to encourage individual reflection and sharing of experiences;
- **Getting controversial,** where we explored individual team members' beliefs and positions on a range of topics in conversation with the organisation's positions on the issues;
- **Cape Coast Castle visit,** a team visit to the slave castle on the coast of Ghana and
- **Engaged with local activists,** with breakfast teach-ins and engaging with local activists over dinner in the evenings.

Having adapted some of the content and sessions based on what you were hearing each day, which one stands out for you? Can you talk about why, but also the intention behind that specific session?

ZMM: When I knew everyone was going to the Cape Coast Castle and Elmina, I had a little bit of apprehension, and I was so happy not to go, given the pain and anger that being there created for me the first time I visited some years ago. So, when people came back (to Accra), and I saw their reactions of being deeply hurt, I think it clarified that colonialism wasn't just what they did to us in schools. Colonialism was also how ingrained the values were in terms of how they treated us. And to revisit that (castle) while we are in Ghana, and while we're having this retreat, for me, it was like "see how resilient we are as a people, how resilient we are as women, and how important it is not to forget, and to also know, to better understand where you are positioned today, in all we do". And I just thought, while we talk about power, it's important to also look at where we've come from, how resilient we can be and are. And maybe that will also stop some of us kowtowing and being too grateful for the breadcrumbs that

come our way, understanding the donor partnership differently and not being grateful for the little we get.

RB: For me, it was the discussions held during "Getting Controversial". The idea was that we would have some controversial statements that represented polarised points of view. We also wanted to do a talk about binaries and how damaging and painful they are. So, we wanted people to have the visceral experience of being forced into a binary. And then people could sit in a fishbowl and debate and people could tap people in and out. They could debate but also witness the debate in order to reflect upon and interrogate different viewpoints. This was an opportunity to invite ***Purposeful*'s** point of view as an institution, so that we could create a space where each individual could reflect upon and build their perspective while also understanding the position of the organisation they work for on that issue. It was also important to hold these two elements: everyone has their beliefs, but ***Purposeful*** does have a point of view. And it's important for staff to hear that without them being lectured and that ***Purposeful***'s point of view is in the context of debates in the sector, debates in the movements, debates in the field. And it gives folks the opportunity to see that play out in real time. I think the important pedagogical piece of this is the experiential nature. It's the understanding that we can replicate the experience of something in a container that's relatively safe (it can't be fully safe because there's power dynamics, people's jobs, but it's safe enough), a safe enough container to really experience the tensions without having to be in a space where you are at risk of losing anything.

ZMM: Yes, people were not ostracised or mocked for their personal opinions. There was a trust and care that went into the preparation of the retreat. And also, like your [Ramatu's] observation of the team, where you said, "Yes, we can, they can deal with this". Even letting them go to that castle in the same bus and come back on the same bus. And we had different races there. So, the visit created an opportunity to ask ourselves questions: how do we acknowledge the past in the work we do? How do we sit with the impact of whiteness and colonialism over generations, the pain and anger it generates, and work with each other, Black and White individuals? For me, at the time I went years ago, I couldn't have travelled back with a white person. That's how it affected me at

that time. It will be different now, of course, having sat with notions of whiteness, an acknowledgement that our resistance should focus on systems and structures rather than individual White people.

RB: I think I walked away from that castle really struck by the banality and the bureaucracy that can be built around (like extreme levels of depravity) violence and genocide. Someone had to keep the ledger.

ZMM: Right. Somebody was writing it.

RB: Someone was filling out forms and packing them in neat notebooks and drawing straight lines so that the ledgers were clear, that someone had to be in the day-to-day bureaucracy of genocide. And I walked away from that feeling that we can all be co-opted. We can all be enlisted. And while white supremacists are very good at it out of practice, none of us are above it. We can all be co-opted and enlisted by just having a job that signs off on a thing. No one's going to say that your whole job is to wipe out millions of people. But your job is to count the bodies before they're put in the gas chamber to die and then count how many people come out. That's your job. So no, you're not fully responsible for the deaths, but still playing a key role.

ZMM: That's how you're feeding your family. So, it is important for each of us to interrogate ourselves and our roles given the systems we work and live in.

RB: Whether this retreat was successful is based on whether folks can identify the structural oppressions [classism, racism, ableism, sexism etc.] when they encounter them, and be thoughtful and strategic about how they engage them. And the identification should not derail everything. That's where we have gotten to in our sector. People have gotten really good at naming and then don't know what to do with it. So, you name it; now you can either deal with it institutionally or not, whether through disruption, choosing to ignore it, or a process of organisational change. But it's being able to see it, name it and then not have that naming derail everything. Because that's sometimes what makes people not name things. It's because you're so afraid you're going to derail the whole thing by naming it so you just don't name it. We want ***Purposeful*** as an institution and other institutions to be able to say, for example, "I see that is white supremacy, that is whiteness acting up, and we have a set of tools to know how we deal with that".

ZMM: And that is the liberation we talked about at the beginning.

Notes

1. For example, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* by Audre Lorde.
2. The first iteration was facilitated by Sierra Leonean feminist scholar: Aisha Fofana Ibrahim.
3. Natalie Collier is the founder and president of The Lighthouse: Black Girl Projects. The organisation's mission is to be a revelatory, unflickering light for Black girls and young women in the south-eastern United States through focused programming and by creating spaces of solidarity and safety.
4. To learn more about Purposeful and its history please see: *We Are Purposeful and Building Our Feminist Hub.*
5. To act in an excessively subservient manner.

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Pan-African Popular Education in Motion: A Conversation with *Towards Feminist Consciousness Collective*

Mjiba Frehiwot and Ramatu Issah speak with Mena Souilem and Maie Panaga

Towards a Feminist Consciousness is a pan-African queer feminist collective founded in 2017 as a safe and liberating space to discuss, theorise, and organise around issues of feminism and liberation, deconstructing them in light of our contexts where systems of oppression intersect: colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, and exile. It also came about as an activation of the idea of documenting and mobilising within feminist movements in Arabic-speaking Africa and West Asia. The ***Collective*** participates in the production of revolutionary feminist knowledge through writings, personal experiences, translations, and research that aim to analyse the roots of patriarchal and colonial systems and their supporting structures while actively creating alternative pan-Africanist feminist knowledge.

Mjiba: Hello, and thank you for agreeing to do this interview. Can you please introduce yourself and the organisation.

Mena: The ***Collective*** started in 2017, based in Western Sahara, North Africa. We started as a platform for connecting to and developing a space for women, girls, and queer folks from both Western Sahara and Mauritania, due to the similarities of both places, and to share a political and educational space. In Western Sahara specifically, the context is a bit more complicated, if I may just point this out. So, the platform was like a start of a conversation with feminists, to at least introduce feminism to a lot of the people. It evolved from there to a feminist queer platform with a focus on knowledge production and political education. Currently, we are mostly focused on all the Arabic-speaking regions of Africa. The ***Collective's*** focus is on introducing pan-African(ist) feminist ideas and feminist principles, in a very simplified way, to the people of this region. We profile scholars, activists, and political educators from our history.

The ***Collective*** also discusses contemporary happenings in the movement and how to contribute to achieving pan-Africanism. We feature campaigns specifically about how suppressive and oppressive systems are affecting the lives of women and girls, and queer folks in the region. We try to dissect the issues so they are easier to understand for the masses and also to new and younger generations who are not as familiar with these philosophies. Additionally, we have collaborations with some of the other platforms in the region. We are rooted in pan-Africanism and rooted in the notions of African feminism as well.

Mjiba: Are you the founders of the ***Collective*****?** How was it founded?

Mena: As I mentioned, when we started in 2017, the group featured people from Western Sahara and Mauritania. But due to a lot of issues of continuity and rooting ourselves in collaborative work, it ended up being me and my sister, whom you know, Suad. We just do the work; we do not have an administrative way to approach the work that we do. So, there are no defined rules. Maie joined us in 2021. So now there are three of us in the team. We do the work together and decide together. We work on the materials for the platform that we are producing together. We decide also on the content that we are receiving. Maie and Suad specifically work on the writings. They have editing roles in the ***Collective***. So, they work more with the writings that we receive, and they work with the writers. They sometimes even guide them through the process of writing. So maybe Maie can elaborate on that part. But this is a very, very "collective" type of collective work, if you see what I mean.

Mjiba: Maie, can you talk a bit about the writing and how that works for the ***Collective*** because I think the writing part is important.

Maie: Okay, so I am just going to emphasise that we are trying to work smart and hard at the same time. There are three of us, and there is a significant expectation regarding feminist consciousness, especially since we are one of the few, if not the only, Arabic-speaking pan-African platforms. Every now and then, we have an accountability moment, recognising the need to be more methodological in how we approach things. But the three of us have full-time jobs, different avenues of activism, and the responsibility of keeping the platform running. So, it is a mix-and-match approach. We feel that our audience trusts us, which is why we often receive random submissions. Many of these come through relationships

of trust, particularly with Suad. For instance, we might be talking to someone, and they mention a great idea, critique, or issue.

The ***Collective*** has improved in the way it encourages people to write, saying, "That's a great idea, just write it down." Often, people hesitate, asking, "What's the use? Why should I write it?" But we persist, urging them to try. Still, we struggle with how many African feminists see themselves as non-writers. They may feel comfortable discussing their ideas but are not confident in turning them into a complete written piece. This is compounded by a lack of familiarity with editorial processes. I come from an editorial, academic, and theoretical background, and part of the challenge is improving the text without breaking the writer's spirit, especially when fear is involved.

Mjiba: Have you issued a call for papers recently?

Maie: We have put out a couple of calls for submissions and received many papers in response. Randomly, we receive two to three submissions on any given day, and it is up to us to decide if they align with our political stance. Unfortunately, we have had to reject a few submissions, which is heartbreaking for all of us. We try to reassure writers that rejection does not demean their ideas or that their effort lacks value, but rather that we see them contributing something different or better suited for another context.

Mjiba: Do you receive papers from a specific group of people?

Maie: The editorial process itself is a mix-and-match. We consider the writer's background, their comfort level with writing, and their familiarity with editorial processes, adjusting our approach accordingly. This often takes longer than standard editorial work. Typically, we are used to a straightforward approach adding comments and sending them back. However, structural and technological barriers complicate things. For instance, not everyone is familiar with tools like Google Drive. Sometimes, writers respond to comments directly rather than integrating changes into the text. Despite these challenges, we view the writing and editorial process as part of our feminist conscious practice. We believe that anyone with something to say is a writer, and we are committed to supporting them throughout, even if it takes two months. This makes our publishing schedule unpredictable, often requiring us to fill gaps with our own writing. Suad is a

driving force constantly writing and pushing us forward. She might say, "This is happening in Kenya; let us write about it and cover it."

We are very conscious that this is not just about covering news, but also a practice of solidarity. We are constantly echoing and amplifying what is happening across the continent. We also make it a point to highlight specific issues when they need attention. While working in the background with different writers, we do handle a lot of the writing ourselves.

Our last call for submissions was about femicide, right? We are still pushing for that. The response was amazing. We received poetry, and some people even sent videos which we were not used to. We had to adjust by figuring out how to share those videos. We have also been co-writing many statements because we are angry. Over the past few months, we have collaborated on multiple statements. We also handle our own translations. It is often as simple as saying, "I like this, it resonated with me, it changed me, let me translate it". We also accept translations from different writers, so even if someone is not confident in their ability to write, they can send a translation, and we will proofread and refine it.

Mena: Honestly, the entire operation runs on trust and love. We honour this by taking our time, even as we put pressure on ourselves to deliver statements, writing, and popular education. We work to pull people in gradually. Most of our writers, even those who were frustrated by the editorial process, have returned to writing with us, which is a great outcome.

Mjiba: In what languages do you accept submissions?

Mena: Arabic and English.

Mjiba: Have you received anything in French or Portuguese?

Maie: No, but we have done some translations. There were a couple of statements, especially regarding Western Sahara and many causes that we translated. We felt that we also needed to include our diasporic pan-African community. We did push ourselves to do Spanish and French translation. Even if we receive the text in English, we do the editorial in English, we then translate it and we put it out in Arabic.

Mjiba: What are the main objectives of ***Towards Feminist Consciousness Collective?***

Mena: The objective part is a bit tricky because it has evolved over time. We started with specific goals and then refined them, but, currently, we are trying to shift our focus to broader objectives. When we began, our main goal was to create a feminist database or, at the very least, feminist knowledge production from Arabic-speaking Africa or, more generally, the African continent within the Arabic-speaking movement.

To provide some context, back in 2017 and earlier, much of what the Arabic-speaking movement was producing reflected the situations in regions like Southwest Asia or the Middle East. This was often generalised as the "Arab" movement, which we wanted to challenge. We recognised that the contexts, cultures, political systems, and histories in Arabic-speaking Africa were distinct from those in the Middle East, and we aimed to highlight these differences. Our objective was to produce feminist knowledge rooted in our own African history and identity. We have managed to accomplish that, and we also emphasised the need to use "Arabic-speaking" rather than "Arab" to describe the movement. This distinction is crucial for us because not everyone in our ***Collective*** identifies as Arab. Over time, this distinction has gained more acceptance, and now "Arabic-speaking movement" is more commonly used.

One of our ongoing objectives, is to make the knowledge we produce as accessible and simplified as possible. We are speaking to younger generations and the masses who might not have access to complex academic terms or concepts. We are aware of the nature of the educational systems we come from, and we know that not everyone will understand a lengthy feminist thesis about their lived realities. So, we wanted to create alternative content that young women and girls can find online and easily understand, something they can use in their daily lives or in their struggles. We have aimed at simplifying feminist and queer knowledge production so that the people receiving it can not only understand it, but also use it as a form of empowerment. Suad, for example, simplifies political education for our ***Collective*** using direct, clear, unapologetic language that anyone can understand. Her work, such as the infographics she creates for Instagram, helps make complex concepts more accessible to everyone. This approach has been successful, and people are able to understand the systems we are speaking about after reading just a few pages.

Maie: Initially, as part of the audience of ***Towards Feminist Consciousness***, there were a few things that became very clear to me. Though they were never explicitly stated as objectives, they were evident in the work. First, the language used in the platform, while simple and unapologetically clear, is deeply embedded with two key concepts: class consciousness and the need to unite struggles across identities. We do not see class consciousness often in recent knowledge production, which tends to focus on intersectionality (race, gender, class, etc.), but ***Towards Feminist Consciousness*** integrates class consciousness in a way that highlights its importance in the liberation struggle.

For me, the most important lesson I took from ***Towards Feminist Consciousness*** was the call to stop fragmenting ourselves based on gender, sexuality, or geography. Yes, as Black Arabic-speaking and African Arabic-speaking feminists, we face invisibility between the continent and the Arab world, but the platform made it clear that the liberation struggle is not about splitting ourselves based on our most oppressed identities. It is about collective liberation.

A clear example of this approach came during the war in Sudan. We noticed that many feminists in the Arab world were not addressing Sudan as much as they did Palestine. However, ***TFC*** consistently brought up the struggle in Western Sahara and Sudan. This taught me the importance of bringing African struggles into every conversation, as Western Sahara is a crucial part of our history. It was also important to learn that we should not limit ourselves to a regional focus. Solidarity is not just about the struggles in our immediate geographic area, but about understanding that any African or Black struggle is our struggle. The word comrade is used often in feminist consciousness literature, and I appreciate how it reminds us that we are fighting together, side by side.

Another key objective is to highlight instances of mobilisation and popular uprisings across the continent. It is not just about quoting figures like Amilcar Cabral or Angela Davis, but also about recognising that the many protests carried out by the people themselves are without any central leader. This emphasises that we can all be leaders, theorists, and agents of change, without hierarchical divisions in the movement. Everyone has the capacity to contribute, whether through writing, organising, or action. This was especially evident in pan-African Women's Day, where we highlighted instances of mass protests. The point is

not the immediate success or failure of these protests, but the fact that they are part of our history.

Ultimately, ***TFC*** helped me feel less resentful about constantly having to assert that I am not Arab, but African. The platform reinforced that our liberation struggles are interconnected and that no one is left behind. This is the core objective: collective liberation for all of us.

Mjiba: What do you think is the state of pan-Africanism today? And what is the role of women and queer folks in that?

Mena: I think it is a bit tricky to define that from our standpoint because, as much as we root ourselves in pan-Africanism, there is not much mobilising or collaborative space for collectives like ours to come together or share space. We have individuals, activists, and people in different organisations working and talking about pan-Africanism, but still, there is not a lot of connection-building, or at least challenging the borders or contexts that separate us.

There are language barriers that prevent us from building a collaborative ground to share knowledge and understand where we come from. Even though we root ourselves deeply in pan-Africanism, and we are unapologetically African activists and feminists, there is still a barrier between us and the rest of the continent. And that barrier, at least primarily, is a language issue, which we understand. There is also a long history of separation that still exists. We try as much as we can to challenge it by building different connections. All of us, being in different places, try to answer requests, to do interviews or podcasts, to build connections, and make it known that we are here, a pan-African platform that operates in Arabic.

Mjiba: Maie, did you want to add anything to that? Because I think that is an important contestation that many of us are feeling.

Maie: I would like to bring something in. I was sitting in Cape Town with a couple of comrades this week, and we were talking about how, although we have more accessibility and communication channels than liberation movements had when they were making connections between Cairo, Senegal, and Kenya, there are still restrictions embedded in the systems we are in. There is the issue of funding and philanthropy, which emphasises the transnational aspect, but not

necessarily the cross-regional aspect. It is not that one is better than the other, but it is easier for us to walk to conferences and make a big impact.

But there are things we need to consider, like the embedding of my generation and the following generations in nation-states. We constantly see people asking, "Why should I care about Kenya? I have enough on my hands with Sudan. Why should I care about Senegal?" Each of us ends up focusing on our own nation, and then we connect based on solidarity statements, but it is not enough. There is a generational gap, unfortunately. I hear this often from younger comrades, and I keep reminding them that we do care because we have the same enemy. It is the same threat. We care about what is happening in Kenya and with the IMF. Yes, Sudan is burning, but the IMF is still growing. We are dealing with proxy wars, and the US, Russia, and others are turning our struggles into their main theme. We are seeing the selling of our land to new colonial powers, like the Emirates, for example. This notion that "my house is burning, so I am not looking toward others" is not the answer. If I am looking toward others, I am asking for their solidarity, but I am not exchanging it. It is confusing to me because we are privileged. We have many communication channels. Yes, feminist consciousness comes out in Arabic, but you can put it on Google Translate and still get the message, even if it is not perfect. So, I think it is about aligning politically around our end goal, which is liberation. It's not about fragmenting the work. We do not have enough space for cross-regional meetings. And when they do happen, there are often a few misogynistic men present, so we spend time fighting them, which is frustrating.

The role of women and queer folks? We are the hardest-working people, and we are not expecting anything in return. I think that is our role. We do not give in to despair, and I have been taught to carry that forward.

Mena: Yeah, I just want to mention something about the pan-Africanism as a movement right now. When Maie was speaking, it reminded me of something. I want to mention that there is also a distinction between how the younger generation right now is relating to pan-Africanism and how the older generation is working toward it. For example, in the context of Western Sahara, a lot of women are part of the National Council of Women in Western Sahara. They are involved in various African circles, including the African Union. You mostly find the political presence of Western Sahara in those circles, and you often

hear it discussed by older generations of pan-Africanists. But when you look at the younger generation, you do not necessarily find the feminist aspect or the activism of younger folks. There is a distinction between how the older generation sees the issues we are working on and how we, as younger people, see them. Prioritisation of issues is a big challenge to overcome in our work.

Mjiba: What are some of the challenges of the contemporary use of popular education in the pan-African Feminist Movement?

Maie: I am so sorry. I raised it too quickly because I have been having this conversation recently. I just want to put it out there. It is not to disregard that there are spaces for doing this, but popular and political education took a backseat to mobilising and organising. Popular education is a process that takes years. It is not enough to just write something simple or complicated about intersectionality and expect someone to read it and change their mind. It is great when it works, but people are often afraid of working with those who are not like us. One session or one workshop will not be enough to bring them on board. I am part of the workshop generation. I have been to many, but most of my political education came through asking comrades, "Can you send me books? Who's doing this work?" Access to books is not easy. Many of them are in English or Portuguese, and I depended a lot on comrades from the older generation to steer me toward resources. Ten years ago, there were many political education programmes within the continent, many run by feminists. But I cannot find them anymore. I am trying to do the same work. With ***TFC***, we are trying to bring some of that back, but it also has to be done collectively. Popular education requires sitting with people repeating the same thing for two years before they begin to understand. We tried doing this with two groups, the Hasanaya group and the Black Feminist group, but it has been a struggle. People expect an answer at the end of a workshop: "What is the direct action toward success?" That obsession frustrates me. How do we bring back popular education? I am asking myself that question.

Mjiba: Why is it important to struggle around race, class, and gender inside and outside of organisations? Is it something that should be foundational in any feminist movement?

Mena: Yes, thank you for the question. I do believe it is really important. However, in the region there seems to be something missing. The lens of class and race is missing. People are talking like these things do not exist. And at the end of the day, you end up with a text that does not reflect what is happening. You, the reader, will end up saying, "Huh, but this does not sound like something that I relate to." Maybe someone else who does not face these things daily can understand it and feel like, "Oh my God, this is happening." But someone from our own context, for example, because the three of us come from very distinct backgrounds, will be critical of the absence of class and race. We are not just from very class-defined backgrounds, we are also from very complicated political backgrounds.

I mean, the most prominent aspect of oppression that we live under in the African context at least, is class struggle, for most of us. When we think about the rich, when we think about the people who have it good, who have the privilege, or who have the class opportunities, we are talking about a very, very small margin of people. And when we see class in its broader aspect, we are talking about different contexts. We are talking about bringing that into focus because you cannot choose not to have it. So, for me, it is not about the choice. It is about you staying true to what you are preaching. You are staying true to the liberation notions that you are talking about. Or you are simply omitting them and omitting the bigger truth of what the people are facing and just going ahead with that delusion. So that is from my own part. But I will pass it back to you, Maie.

Maie: And I think it is our biggest nightmare, even though we never said it, our fear that the more we go into this work, the more it separates us from our community. Class and race are in my family house. I can admit, I can relate more to an Audre Lorde than my mother. It happens, I grew with that. I separated myself and I am trying to find my way back. It is easier to quote all those amazing academics that I love and cherish. I keep going to conferences and I see us sitting there talking about class and the dispossessed and this and that, but no one is talking to the invisible labour that is happening constantly around us, people serving us tea and coffee. I was just in Cape Town and there was this assumption, we are creating a very un-homophobic place because it is an upper class. Yet, the community that serves us tea and coffee and cleans is robbed of

the "opportunity" to be queer. None of them can be women, Black, racialised labour nor can they be part of the conversation we are having to better the world.

Mjiba: Where do you see the pan-African movement in the next 20 years?

Mena: I will be optimistic because, for some reason, I am feeling that way today. Perhaps it is because it is raining, and we have had five years of drought. Seeing the rain makes me feel like everything is going to be solved.

I think that even though it is difficult, we sometimes must acknowledge that things are moving forward. I, personally, struggle with that. Even if I accomplish something significant, I often just think of it as a task that is finished and done. There is no gratification afterward. However, this year specifically, I have noticed some progress. For example, Suad in the All-African People's Revolutionary Party (AAPRP) and some of us in different spaces have started to connect. I believe that in the next few years, there ought to be some initiative happening. Some of us will need to take the lead on these.

We struggle with taking the initiative. We struggle with taking the first step, with recognising that this is the moment to act rather than postponing it or waiting for someone else to do it. This is a responsibility all of us on the continent need to shoulder. Hopefully, in the next 20 years, we will have established stronger connections and built better ties among ourselves. There will be a deeper understanding of how pan-Africanism translates into regional contexts. This is crucial because, for example, during our histories and resistance movements, the lines were clearer. There was imperialism, and we, the people, were fighting it. The distinction was evident.

Today, the challenges are more complex. For instance, while I might be fighting against one issue, someone in Ghana or Senegal might be addressing an entirely different one. We sometimes struggle to understand each other's battles. I am hopeful about the next five years. I believe that in that time, we can establish stronger connections, build more understanding, and lay the groundwork for future efforts.

It is important to recognise that work done in one context cannot automatically translate to success regionally. That idea is completely unrealistic. At the same time, much of the effort currently falls on the shoulders of the diaspora. While their contributions are valuable, there is a downside. These individuals

are clinging to notions and trying to mobilise, but the ties between them and the people on the continent are still weak. As a result, much of the work misses its mark in terms of relevance and impact for those on the ground. I hope that within the next five years, some of us will take the initiative to mobilise and create something, even if it starts with a smaller group, that can propel us forward in the next 15 or 20 years.

Maie: Thank you. I see this happening much sooner than 20 years from now. This is urgent! We do not have five years to wait. We simply do not. Speaking as someone who has completely lost their country, it feels impossible to see beyond this immediate proxy war. Just yesterday, Russia vetoed a motion to stop the violence. What is Russia doing in Sudan? Why are we even facing this reality? Why is Ukraine involved? Why is the Emirates seizing land between Sudan, the Maasai, and Tanzania? What is going on? This urgency is not just about the present political moment, although the ongoing genocide has amplified the need for immediate action, the entire continent is facing the rise of fascism, nationalism, anti-rights movements, and attacks on gender equity. These are not abstract issues; they are real challenges that demand our attention right now. We cannot wait five years. The time is now. I see this as a pedagogy, a guiding framework, that previous generations may have believed was complete because they did the work and saw some progress. But it needs to be passed on to the next generation. This pedagogy is a compass. It is about direction and purpose. This urgency is not abstract. It is personal and political. Recently, Sudanese feminists I work with told me they had long resisted identifying as African. They had been told for so long that they could not be both African and Arab. Yet, during the war, the support they received from Africans made them embrace their identity as Africans. They came to see that it is possible to be both African and Arab, and that realisation arose from a moment of crisis. Now, the challenge is to bridge the gap of the political African with the loving African, and to channel both into this pedagogy. This is what we need right now, not in five years, not in 20. The time is now!

Notes

1. For more information on ***Towards Feminist Consciousness,*** please visit https://feministconsciousnessrevolution.wordpress.com/
2. Information about the veto can be found here: https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12659.doc.htm

Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa by Naminata Diabate. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020.

Ololade Faniyi

"At the time when I was naked, I felt so powerful... the power even to hit a policeman..." (43). Naminata Diabate in *Naked Agency* interrogates expressions of resistance that women engage in across Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa and beyond. This resistance, predicated on defiant disrobing, exposure, and shaming, she terms "naked agency". Diabate begins by contextualising her terminological choice, departing from terms like "genital power" and "genital cursing" that scholars have adopted to describe events regardless of how women themselves choose to name their resistance tactics. She illustrates this naming practice through the events of July 2002, when hundreds of Niger Delta women gathered to protest against a multinational oil company and its local and foreign expatriate workers, demanding basic infrastructure and employment for their families. In doing so, she questions the role of spokespersons who define women's disrobing and points to the complexities of narratives around agency, exploitation, satisfaction, and desperation that complicate the mediation and translation of women's resistance. Diabate frames this book as both an intellectual and personal project, intending to unpack contextually driven modes of dissent across Africa that refute universalising definitions and clarifications. As she argues, "(insurgent nakedness) and similar others should be read on their own terms but also in conjunction with the larger sociopolitical and aesthetic frameworks" (3).

Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach that is descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical, Diabate examines African cosmologies, theories of agency, and biopolitics, as well as news reports, historical documents, documentaries, novels, autobiographies, social media posts, and pictorial arts. She develops the term "naked agency" by analysing dozens of protests in Francophone and

Anglophone African countries between 1922 and 2017. Diabate (4) poses three central questions:

"What kinds of sociopolitical climates and arrangements call for the deployment of self-disrobing in anger?"

"How is women's agency to be understood and conceptualized in light of the reactions of their targets and other stakeholders?"

"What is being lost by focusing on precolonial and colonial explanatory frameworks?"

Diabate adopts "naked agency" as both a concept and reading praxis that acknowledges the fluctuating narratives of power and vulnerability involving women and the targets of their insurgent nakedness and shaming.

Pulling back from the endless empowering narratives used to read these resistance acts, Diabate prompts us to examine the biopolitical conditions where women's insurgent nakedness often serves as their last resort – when all else fails, and their bodies are all they have left – thus making these acts operational only in exceptionally deplorable conditions. She further pushes against ethnic flattening by highlighting how women's political agency and tactics differ across contexts, from genital cursing in West Africa to the naked shaming tactics of Fees Must Fall students in South Africa. Diabate's most generative contribution in this book is her counter to the overrepresentation of defiant disrobing as either purely empowering or purely victimising. She challenges the romanticisation and simplistic frameworks through which these acts are read, frameworks that obscure the liminal space between agency and constraint, especially instances of exploitation, regret, or backlash in a postcolonial biopolitical space where resistance is almost putatively futile.

The book is divided into three sections and eight "scenes" rather than chapters – a term she adopts to emphasise the interactive social dynamic between protesters and audiences and "foreground the performative nature of the women's act, thus joining the performers and their audiences into a mutually constitutive dynamic" (20). In Section One, "Restriction", Diabate examines case studies from Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa. The former represents how the state rejects women's self-exposure, which in that context was meant to purify the land and curse their incumbent president. Within a cultural context

that interpreted these women's nakedness as an armed weapon, the state became an instigator of murderous violence on the streets of Abidjan, killing seven and injuring at least a hundred. Diabate employs biopolitics as a framework to unpack how the postcolonial state, political class, war machines, and multinational corporations operate to use women as political pawns and mark them for death while weaponising the controlling images of oppressed Third World women. Diabate uses this case study to explain how agency operates within the constraints of social structures, where women's agency must be understood in tandem with their targets and bystanders – a co-constitutive agency that stops or slows for the women where their targets' begins or speeds up. Here, Diabate proposes a connection between naked agency and affirmative biopolitics that pays attention to embodied forms of contestation and self-annihilation as agentive, including reading naked agency as mutually inclusive of the destructive and constitutive, simultaneous victimhood and sovereignty and the presence of death in relations of power, especially in instances where women believe their disrobing reverses the direction of death but the opposite occurs. She offers a second case study of the 1995 South African documentary "Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)" about women who stripped in protest against housing demolitions. The documentary reveals the post-protest clarity of the women, showing how they experienced both empowerment ("I felt so powerful") and regret/shame afterward, haunted by their community's disapproval and the archiving of their nakedness on camera, thus complicating positions of power and victimhood. While marking this documentary as different from racist, colonial voyeuristic images and historical determinism, Diabate insists it does not reflect passive nakedness. However, by simply recording the women's actions while muting their voices, the documentary replicates a neocolonial injury to the women.

In Section Two, "Co-optation", further complicating the notions of power and agency, Diabate highlights the spectrum of factional co-optation and self-instrumentalisation through the examples of the Takumbeng in Cameroon, the Ajanou in Côte d'Ivoire, and Usana in Senegal. The Takumbeng, post-menopausal women thought to embody mystical abilities, accomplished the sociocultural task of alleviating suffering under Biya's dictatorship. Meanwhile, the latter two female groups were co-opted by the state to give an illusion of equality to secure aid, underscoring the postcolonial bureaucratic exploitation of gender

and tradition. Diabate identifies multiple agents of appropriation, including filmmakers, politicians, and powerbrokers. She uses the film "Les Saignantes" to demonstrate how cinema adapts and transforms traditional female rituals. The film appropriates images of the Mevoungou – a female secret society among Cameroon's Beti people – and their purifying rituals in an attempt to heal symbolically the diseased postcolonial nation-state. However, in doing so, it simultaneously desexualises the purification ritual, which originally centered on the potency of the clitoris, thereby weakening the power of genital purification via genital cursing. By using the images of women's bodies while ignoring their concerns, Diabate argues that the filmmaker reduces them to naked lives denied political prerogatives, extending colonial readings of naked protesting women as pre-political. By framing women's bodies as both poison and cure, she argues that the filmmaker falls into a binary within a neoliberal biopolitical framework where women and their modes of contestation and retribution are deritualised in a secularising process, itself demonstrating the unfinished business of the postcolonial nation-state regarding indigenous religious practices.

In Section Three, "Repression", Diabate redirects our attention to consider the spectrum of power relations, particularly where secularisation has enabled Fees Must Fall protesters, in ways that do not rely on either the sanctity of their bodies or their status as moral guardians, to inflict shame, and where their nakedness was used to defeat repressive police violence. However, she points to the purposeful secularisation of genital cursing by public officials who transform rituals into violations of decorum and make the women available for state repression. Diabate prompts us to explore how the political class's deliberate silence in response to these protests complicates Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" When women speak through embodied protest but those in power strategically ignore their message, it becomes a question not of whether marginalised groups can speak but whether those in power will acknowledge that speech. This smothered communication, Diabate argues, is illustrated in Obinkaram Echewa's novel I Saw the Sky Catch Fire. The literary imaginary becomes a new path to encounter the women of the Igbo Women's War who dared bare their buttocks against colonisers and native allies imposing oppressive taxes. Their protests backfired in multiple ways, with reactions to their dissent ranging from murderously violent to epistemically ignorant and counterproductive – not

just empowering. The cycle involved not just women versus colonisers but women versus soldiers, versus native allies, versus colonisers: the colonisers dismissed the women's nakedness as primitive hysteria, unable to read the Igbo women under the compounding layers of 19th-century ethnographic discourse; meanwhile, the Igbo soldiers who witnessed it understood its cultural power as a curse and, though not the intended targets, responded with murderous violence, killing over a hundred women. The novel thus reveals how protests can trigger unintended and devastating consequences when different audiences read and react to naked protest through their own cultural and political frameworks.

This book summons and is written for African scholars and activists committed to rewriting the erasure and absences in African women's historical and contemporary representation, an investment of African scholars of women's, gender, and postcolonial studies since the 1960s that continues to be a pressing critical recovery project. Reading along with the reflexive and self-corrective project that Diabate triggers with this book, I would propose that rage deserves equal consideration as a motivating force of naked protests, beyond her central emphasis on desperation, last resort, exceptional situations, social/cultural authority, and biopolitical conditions. Rage maps, for instance, onto what she refers to as the "secularizing" intent of the Fees Must Fall protesters, who not only bared their breasts but held shamboks (long leather whips) to punish abusers. Rage also appears in Stella Nyanzi's deployment of public nudity as "radical rudeness" in defense of democracy and in the more recent 2024 Uganda protests where young feminists stripped in protest against corruption. These cases provide another lens for understanding the ephemerality of naked agency and the central role of emotions and affect in protests, as they are catalysed not only by desperation and vulnerability but also by the collective force of raging women – particularly among college-educated feminists and/or women with digital and social capital. This raises other questions about how we read these protests when they emerge not only from desperation but from politically conscious rage. Should we not emphasise multiple motivations, especially when they help us register the seriousness of what is being protested and the making of authentic archives to counter "what is being lost"?

While developing her central concept of "naked agency" in contrast to the cultural meanings and power dynamics embedded in terms like "genital

cursing", "genital power", and "female genital power", Diabate argues that she interchanges naked agency with other supposedly "neutral" terms such as "defiant disrobing", "naked self-exposure", "assaultive nakedness", and "intentional nudity", while incorporating indigenous words for these acts across different contexts. However, it is not explicitly clear why those alternative terms are considered neutral. While we might assume that Diabate reads them as merely descriptive of the physical act of disrobing – without the embedded cultural and symbolic meanings in terms like "genital power" that make claims about the nature, presumed effects, intent, and outcomes of women's nakedness – and that these terms in their universality support her argument countering the homogenisation of African cultural meanings, I question the supposed neutrality of these terms. They still retain the assumptions and connotations of genital cursing and (female) genital power, and I would argue that justifying the use of these alternative terms as universal and descriptive rather than neutral would have better served this theoretical framework.

As Diabate unpacks the precarity of naked protests and questions what happens to the resisters' agency if their targets misinterpret their gestures, I further question whether the burden of translation and legibility is unfairly placed on protesters like the Opération Kodjo Rouge. Given their translations, mediations, and adaptations – such as circumventing nakedness with white dresses that take on the connotation of nudity in a setting of carceral control – should we not instead examine how dominant groups actively maintain their inability or unwillingness to understand? If French claims of incomprehension regarding the Kodjo Rouge's menstrual cloth tactics are more likely strategic than genuine, given extensive anthropological documentation of their colonial subjects, should we not press harder on how "not understanding" serves power relations by delegitimising protest actions? Yet the other side of this argument critiques the uncritical translation praxis of journalists and bloggers who frame Opération Kodjo Rouge as peaceful action when the ritual itself prescribes social and material death upon its targets. A similar tension appears in how Diabate reads the group's naming praxis. She argues that the protesters' use of the militaristic term "Opération" proves "that the master's tools can slowly dismantle the master's house" (163), contrary to Audre Lorde's famous statement. However, this reading oversimplifies Lorde's statement by focusing solely on

her literal language use but overlooks how the protesters' use of the term could be an appropriation, ironic commentary, or strategic deployment. This parallels how the Egba Women strategically appropriated the American Declaration of Independence in their 1947 protests against colonial taxation. Their rearticulation of this document, originally written in a context of racial erasure, demonstrated how gender and nationalism were inseparable for Egba women but maintained their own framework of intersectional and anticolonial resistance.

In conclusion, Diabate's core argument about how the uncritical framing of endless empowerment creates the same controlling images of eternal victimhood is profoundly generative. These over-representations overlook both the ephemerality of positions of power in the postcolonial biopolitical state and the epistemological and physical violence that naked agency can render on its resisters. What has been most reinforced through my reading of this book is the inaccessibility and archival silence on female defiant nakedness in the African context. These silences are not merely gaps in the historical record. Rather, they are actively complicated by postcoloniality and the biopolitical state, and the summoning of these women's bodies as object lessons by the academy, film, and power brokers perpetuates the very power dynamics their protests seek to challenge.

Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective From the Global South, edited by Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana, and Karl von Holdt. Public Sociology series. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.

Asanda-Jonas Benya

The book looks at the long tradition of critical engagement in research done over the last forty years at the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP), a research institute with a long history of working with movements and communities across South Africa, doing what it calls critical engagement. According to the book's editors, critical engagement is a "sociological practice involving distinct processes of knowledge production in partnership with popular movements as well as the development of theory through the interaction between scholarly and political practices" (9). The first five chapters give a historical account of critical engagement at SWOP, its benefits and "pitfalls" in different projects as they tried to "develop a social science of liberation" (54). It outlines debates SWOP engaged in, the various publics they worked with, the conceptual ground they broke, and their influence, especially within the labour movement and later in policy circles (Bezuidenhout, Mnwana and von Holdt's; Webster's; Buhlungu's; von Holdt's chapters).

This volume contributes to several debates on decolonial and critical research approaches, popular education, concept formation, knowledge production in the global South, critical engagement, and many more. There is an attempt in the book to theorise critical engagement and juxtapose it to Burawoy's public sociology. To that end, some chapters map out key features that distinguish critical engagement from public sociology. Unlike public sociology, which, as Çelik argues, develops out of "stable democracies" (239) of the North, critical engagement emerges from political struggles that characterise countries in the global South. For Von Holdt, critical engagement develops out of the interaction between the sociological and political fields; it is outward-looking and not bound

by disciplinary boundaries; it critiques the status quo and is concerned with knowledge production and conceptual innovation questions.

Chapters in the first part of the book highlight how concepts emerged from the slow creative meaning-making processes that involve dialogues, close engagements, deep interactions with different publics, and reflexivity. Through these processes, concepts such as "social movement unionism" (69), the "apartheid workplace regime" (25), "violent democracy" (36), "a social science of liberation" (80), "critical engagement" (1) as a research approach, workers' "tacit knowledge" (48), "dual nature of protest" (36), "informal political systems of patronage, factionalism and violence" (36), "movement landscapes" (43), and more were developed (Bezuidenhout, Mnwana and von Holdt's; Webster's; von Holdt's chapters). From the book, it is clear that concept development is not the forte of only academics but also intellectuals and ordinary people who experience the struggles about which academics theorise. The editors of the book note that "a significant part of sociological knowledge was produced outside the scope of the university" (6) through deep engagements with the people. Not only concepts emerged from these processes but also the labour studies discipline. Buhlungu notes that the "assertive labour movement" (74) of the 1970s and ensuing dialogues between intellectuals and activists were critical in the trajectory of Labour studies and Sociology. For Webster, these critical engagements were a "source of analytical strength" (56) even if not always appreciated by unions and the university, as also illustrated in von Holdt's and Buhlungu's chapters (and in Buhlungu's seminal monograph entitled "A Paradox of Victory").

The second set of chapters looks at contemporary research, shifts in SWOP's research agenda, and how scholars have been experimenting with engaged scholarship both inside SWOP (Mnwana's; Kesselman's; Cock's chapters) and at the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at Wits (Yingwana's chapter), Land and Accountability Research Centre (LARC) at UCT (Claassens and Sihlali's chapter), and the Work Studies Group from the South (GETSUR) in Chile (Vejar's chapter) and Turkey (Çelik's chapter). The focus moves beyond labour to environmental, feminist, land, and food justice movements. While most chapters draw on South Africa, others go beyond to Chile and Turkey. Drawing from contemporary cases, some of which use participatory action research (PAR), these chapters reflect on practices, research approaches,

and tensions and ambiguities in engaged scholarship. Cock, for instance, explores what dialogical learning entails, what centring people's experiences and being reflexive looks like. Mnwana, Yingwana and Claassens, and Sihlali note the politics and limits of co-producing knowledge. For example, Mnwana was confronted by rural factions in a mining community and had to fight for his autonomy in the face of contentious and divisive local politics. He refused to be bound by the expectations of the community. Yingwana, who inhabits a "hybrid" (145) identity of a scholar/activist, reflects on the easy slippage between PAR and appropriating people's struggles, voices, and experiences in the name of "co-producing knowledge". For Yingwana, the role of people, whom she regards as partners and experts in the inquiry process (151), does not end with conceptual development. She seeks to incorporate them in the writing and dissemination phase. Kesselman's chapter also reflects on doing PAR, where she involved community members in research design, undertaking, and dissemination. She asks what it means to do research that contributes to social justice and has a real-world impact, not only in knowledge production.

Likewise, Kesselman and Claassens and Sihlali note meaningful research takes time and privileges community needs, including the publication format adopted. They critique the university's narrow framing of what constitutes research, what it considers publications, and what is a legitimate peer review process. University research processes do not make room for the necessary relationship-building PAR researchers need to invest in communities, which often takes a long time. They point to power and hierarchies in knowledge production within the university and how these have rendered the work of LARC marginal, even though it has been critical in amplifying community voices. Power is also addressed by Cock concerning the communities she works with, the difficulties of erasing power, and the inherent paradox of reproducing hierarchies while trying to transform relations with communities.

In the face of repressive governments and deepening neoliberalism, Vejar's chapter on GETSUR in Chile reflects on the challenges researchers committed to working with trade unions and co-production of knowledge face. In the context of an unequal global order in knowledge production where the South has been peripherised while the North takes centre stage in theorisation, Çelik's work in Turkey calls for more critical engagements between scholars

in the global South and emphasises the need to know and engage in dialogue with each other before engaging in the Northern channels of knowledge that dominate and shape global sociology. He and von Holdt call for the development of a counter-hegemonic sociology, a "sociology across the south" (235) or a "southern sociology". Burawoy's chapter, a response to the themes covered in the volume, gently critiques the exceptionalism undertone with which some chapters approach practices of critical engagement. He argues that the "posture of all social science" is that it is "necessarily" critically engaged (261). On the idea of Southern sociology, he asks what its demarcations are, who is included and excluded from it, and whether this Southern sociology actually is "a collaboration among leading cosmopolitan sociologists, conversant in English, coalescing into a Southern bloc" (262). Is Southern sociology as distinct from Northern sociology as some chapters suggest? The final chapter by von Holdt is an invitation to develop a counter-hegemonic Southern sociology "which entails a critique of prevailing Northern paradigms" (277).

To varying degrees, the questions that all the chapters contend with are: a) What does it mean to do critically engaged scholarship at conjunctural moments and in different contexts with communities, movements, and varying formations such as mining-affected communities, sex workers, food insecure people, and others? b) What is the relationship between critical engagement or participatory action research and Burawoy's idea of public sociology? and c) How do different publics respond to critically engaged research, what have been the gains and pitfalls of critical engagement? The book also raises questions about the ethics of "claim-making" in critically engaged scholarship – what can scholars ethically claim as their contribution to these victories?

For LARC, SWOP, and GETSUR, there is a strong element of popular education at the heart of their critical engagement. For example, SWOP's monthly breakfast seminars, attract community activists, trade unionists, policymakers, and academics from across Johannesburg for stimulating intellectual exchanges. They have also been working closely with and, at times training, different trade unions that value and centre the experiential knowledge of shop stewards and community members. The formation and publishing of the popular and easily accessible South African Labour Bulletin was also the brainchild of some of the SWOP researchers. LARC has also been working closely with communities,

conducting training on the law and its implications for people who live in rural areas. Several chapters in the volume foreground this kind of "mutual learning" where teachers are learners and learners also teachers, where there is collective reflection on everyday experiences and a commitment to "experiential knowledge" alongside "formal knowledge" (129). As the chapters demonstrate, such practices create possibilities for new co-produced knowledge to emerge.

The book opens up questions about the future of critical engagement. What is the future of critically engaged scholarship at a time when our universities are cutting costs, pursuing profits, and putting pressure on academics to be machines and parachute researchers, who go in and come out without working with communities and learning from communities, when there is a de-emphasis on and limited funding for the kind of research in which all these authors engage? As scholars who value critically engaged scholarship, how do we continue this work considering all these pressures?

When calling for Southern sociology, we must attend to power differences within the global South. The global South is differentiated, and not all global South countries inhabit the same geo-political, economic, and discursive place. Some scholars doing incredible work remain completely invisible even within global South circles. In some cases, it seems that to be visible in the global South, they first need to be endorsed by the North. To produce a Southern sociology requires we pay attention to such patterns in our practices.

It seems that even as the book calls for Southern sociology, it continues to look outside Africa and across the oceans for the global South and not within the continent. The question is, what place does the continent have in this Southern sociology? How do we begin seriously to engage scholarship within the continent as we pursue conversations with the rest of the global South and the North? As we build the Southern sociology, there needs to be a concerted effort to engage the continent, not in parochial inward-looking ways, but in ways that recognise our location and engage with debates and theories that have emerged within the continent, even as we attempt to connect with the global South.

I was struck by the scant reference to the work of African scholars in the volume – as if no critical engagement has been happening on the continent. CODESRIA, while it has its gender-blind spots, has been an outlet for critical

engagement for scholars on the continent. There is, therefore, no lack of scholarship engaging in similar debates about critical engagement on the continent. That such scholars do not figure in the references of the contributors to the volume raises questions. One of those is, in our imagination, who are our interlocutors in the global South, and with what blind spots might we be approaching the call for a Southern sociology? Finally, how might we attend to those blind spots and our biases?

Knowledge production is racialised and gendered. In what ways can this Southern sociology dismantle, instead of reproducing, these gender and racial hierarchies in knowledge production on the continent?

The book mentions the marginalisation of and lack of engagement with black African scholars in the debates within SWOP and, by extension, the Labour studies circles in South Africa. By engaging with the continent in the Southern sociology that we are invited to craft, we will undo the racialised legacies of looking Northwards (or within our immediate racialised and gendered circles) that have characterised South African scholarship and also attend to the racialised and gendered patterns in the division of labour in knowledge production.

For Sethunya and the Legacy She Left Us: A Tribute to Dr Sethunya Tshepho Mosime

Dr Sethunya Tshepho Mosime—a beloved scholar, teacher, advisor, feminist, friend, and comrade—passed away on December 10th, 2024. A senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Botswana, her sudden passing has left our community in grief. We extend our deepest condolences to her family.

For *Feminist Africa*, a pan-African Journal and knowledge community for research, dialogue, and strategy, Sethunya was more than a colleague. She was part of the first cohort of Associate Editors who played a crucial role in strengthening the journal's capacity and solidarity. Her vision and commitment were instrumental in shaping the current phase of *Feminist Africa*. At the time of her passing, she was co-editing an important forthcoming Issue on "Decolonising Play"—a project that reimagined play not as a mere pastime, but as a powerful form of resistance, a learning tool, and a method of healing.

Sethunya was a committed scholar whose doctoral dissertation (2007) in the Graduate Programme in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu Natal (South Africa) critically examined the political economy and status of the media in Botswana. Using Botswana Television, she demonstrated how state ownership of the media compromises freedom of expression and information—a prescient analysis in an age of misinformation. Her later works expanded to include Radio Botswana and the *Botswana Daily News*, consistently raising alarm about what she saw as control of the media and stifling of debate by the State. Her critique of power was an ongoing scholarly theme. As a committed feminist, she was unflinching in her analysis of how government practices re-entrenched and normalised societal inequalities. Her scholarship centred women's experiences, addressing critical issues such as gender-based violence, a pervasive challenge on our continent. Themes of resistance against domination, decolonisation, and women's political leadership in Africa characterised her intellectual work.

Sethunya's engagement extended far beyond scholarly work. She had a vibrant presence across several African feminist networks and was deeply committed to feminist solidarity and social justice.

She was a connector who loved traveling and learning from people. Sethunya had a friend in so many countries we visited with her. She was always eager to taste local cuisine and connect with people. Markets were her favourite exploration sites in every country, and her love for soccer meant she was always on the hunt for soccer team jerseys. Sethunya's approach to friendships and solidarity was marked by genuine curiosity and warmth. She lit up the room when she walked in and was such a great source of joy. With her playful spirit, Sethunya made friends effortlessly. She was known for her humour, her tricks, and her ability to lighten serious moments. Her ability to create joyful environments was a gift to our feminist community.

To her children, her parents, her family, and all who knew and loved her: our *Feminist Africa* family shares in this profound loss. Sethunya's warmth, her intellect, and her playful spirit will be deeply missed. She leaves an indelible mark on our hearts and our work.

From all members of the *Feminist Africa* Collective.

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liberating and emancipating themselves from the shackles of patriarchy and entrenched their voices in the realm of grass-roots peacebuilding.

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